

**PERCEPTIONS OF WOMEN-SPECIFIC SENIOR SECONDARY
CURRICULA IN WESTERN CANADA**

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Dedication

To all the inspirational young women out there –
making a difference in spite of it all.

To Nicholas, for being patient throughout this process
and loving me even when I was unlovable.

Abstract

Perceptions and experiences of a women-specific curriculum (Women's Studies course) taught in a Western Canadian high school constitute the focus of this study. The available sample of fifteen adolescent girls and three professional women were interviewed, individually and in small focus groups. Supplemental data were obtained through an online survey completed by seven additional previous student respondents. Research literature that shaped the study includes Women and Gender Studies, Education (Adolescent Development and Identity, Curriculum Studies, Anti-oppressive Education), and Feminist Sociology. Benefits and challenges of integrating women-specific curricula into high school are discussed with the recommendation that such courses are needed in senior secondary education in public schools.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Inspiration, Questions, and Context

High school is a critical time in the development of young women's self-esteem. Gender not only influences the processes of teaching and learning, but the pressures of everyday life are enormous and "girls are coming of age in a more dangerous, sexualized, media-saturated culture" (LeCroy & Mann, 2008, p. ix). These combined factors contribute to adolescence being a particularly difficult time for girls. Additionally, gender inequality is far from the only oppression young women face. Many encounter ageism, racism, ableism, homophobia, and more "othering" experiences. These intersect to become highly important issues in the lives of women, and have the potential to make success as adults hard to attain. Given these challenges, it is strange that almost no women-based curriculum is available as a part of their education. That situation inspired my research question: Is a woman-based high school course beneficial to girls' internal protective factors (including self-confidence, a love of learning, and self-motivation) and academic self-concept (self-knowledge regarding educational abilities)?

This research of perceptions and lived experience by 15 girls, seven young adults, and three professional adult women is feminist and ethnographic in its approach. Because of that qualitative and theoretical lens, I necessarily insert myself into the research and begin with who I am and how I came to my question and this research. I do insert my own colloquial expressions and move from high to low discourse to document more accurately the process of learning and integrating unfamiliar or new information with my existing experience. I want to keep my own voice while illustrating my increasing participation in

the academy. Other feminists, such as Bettie (2003), Pascoe (2007), and Blackman (1998) have employed similar strategies in their writing.

Girls, all branded with the same iron despite their diverse backgrounds, are labeled and targeted by media, corporations, and every day people. Upon hearing my research topic, people would respond by saying they felt badly for me having to interact with girls, that the research was admirable because girls are “so messed up these days,” or that I would be better to focus my study on boys. When my neighbour asked what my research was on, I began to tell him I was studying adolescent girls, but was cut off (and stunned) by him saying “Oh, you mean the scummy whore-bags!” Personal experience as an adolescent girl,¹ then as a young adult sympathetic to their struggle, planted a seed in my mind to conduct research on girls. Feminist academic research supported my personal observations: Girls have been, and continue to be judged, harassed, disadvantaged, and treated as inferior in school and elsewhere (Bettie, 2003; Lees, 1986; McRobbie, 1991; Pascoe, 2007; Pomerantz, 2008). With dominant discourse teaching girls to be and purporting that they already are flighty, boy-obsessed, gullible, and materialistic, perhaps young women are in need of pro-woman education and guidance.

Studying high school courses created with girls in mind first occurred to me as I noticed how truly inspirational several of my classmates were during my undergraduate degree in Women's Studies; young women who understood so much more about the

1 My first encounter with objectification occurred in front of a juke box; at age 12, my body changed significantly. Leaning forward to look at music selections caused a line of skin to show, between my jeans and sweater. A stranger, about 55, ran his finger along my skin as he walked past. Appalled and offended, I marched after him. I asked him who the hell he thought he was, and told him he had no right to touch me. Amid my show of confidence, I felt trepidation and shame – what was I doing here, making a spectacle of myself? Should I have ignored the touch, kept my peace? Amidst these feelings of shame were stronger feelings of indignation and disgust, and I stood my ground. Nevertheless, it is significant that an obviously strong minded girl such as myself felt shame at her own victimization.

history and complexities of women's oppression than I did. Home-schooled in a small town in Saskatchewan, I had, at that time, no idea that any high school offered Women's Studies. In fact, I did not even know what it was about in post-secondary institutions. I became acquainted with the field when I decided to take Introduction to Women's Studies in my second year at the University of Victoria (UVic), thinking it might be an easy credit. Instead, I was completely blown away by what I learned, and later came to major in it. After admiring my undergraduate colleagues and asking how they came to be majoring in Women's Studies at UVic, I learned that many of them had taken a Women's and/or Gender Studies class in high school. Realizing what a significant impact it could have had on my adolescent life, I began to wonder what those high school courses had to offer.

Having developed a keen interest in high school Women's and/or Gender Studies programs, I sought more information. I learned about and met members of the Miss G__ project, which, since 2005, has been fighting “to get a Gender Studies course into the Ontario Secondary School curriculum” (Miss G_, 2011, np). I began looking for women-specific secondary courses throughout Canada. Unfortunately, I learned, for the most part, they do not exist. Even after six years of Miss G_ activism in Ontario, the curriculum has been stalled in the approval process (Miss G_, 2011, np), and any courses currently offered in Canada are locally developed, “one-shot deals.” In Western Canada, only five high schools (of over 1300) offer a Women's and/or Gender Studies course.

A Women's Studies High School Case Study

Not only are the Women's/Gender Studies courses rare in high school, but research

on the impact they have on students has not been done. To begin to fill this gaping hole, I conducted a case study at one of the few high schools offering a Women's Studies program in Western Canada. My main research question is whether the existing high school Women's and/or Gender Studies courses have been empowering to girls, and what has worked best to make this anti-oppressive education effective in contributing to girls' confidence and academic self-concept. Through interviews and focus groups, I explored the impact one program has on the development of young women's internal protective factors – such as a sense of belonging, self-confidence, life skills, a love of learning, and self-motivation – in relation to intersectional oppressions women of this age may face.

Overall, the data indicate that participating in the Women's Studies program aids girls to become confident, self-sufficient young women and that this type of program contributes to healthy development during adolescence. Survey respondent Nandita wrote the following poignant description of the impact Women's Studies had on her:

This was by far the class that made me more passionate about learning. I was more motivated to learn in my other classes. It made me want to be a strong, intuitive, well informed, and successful woman, and more confident to express more educated opinions in other classes.

While this thesis explores many complex issues surrounding the course, this quote captures the main point: Girls enjoyed learning in the class and gained much from their time spent in Women's Studies.

Personal Assumptions Affecting the Research

A major assumption made during the collection of data and reporting of the findings is that it is useful and positive to empower the underprivileged. Consistent with feminist ethnographic practices in the study of education, I believe inequality and

injustice are undesirable, and that empowering oppressed groups is important:

An underlying assumption to feminist work is the belief that women experience oppression and exploitation and that this experience varies, considering the multiple identities of race, class, culture, ethnicity, sexual preference, age, and physical abilities. (Glesne, 1999)

Young women have important experiences and their contributions are needed in feminist discussions (Mitchell et al., 2001). Further, they can be capable and smart, and can bring significant contributions to their communities despite facing many disadvantages (Plan Canada, 2011). Assumptions are part of any inquiry; one of my assumptions is that empowering girls is important.

Other assumptions no doubt colour this thesis in various hues and shades. I endeavour to be transparent in my assumptions and personal impacts on the research. Further, “many feminists have written that 'finding ones voice' is a crucial process of their research and writing” (Reinharz, 1992, p. 16). This was my experience, and throughout the thesis, my personal thoughts throughout the research, analysis, and writing stages are occasionally detailed. Despite my efforts for transparency, I admit that, ironically, I cannot recognize all of my own inherent biases. In some sections, I share an anecdote, in others, I detail either how I asked a question in a leading manner, or how I failed to ask a question at all. My analytic process is described as thoroughly as possible, but surely I have left something out. I was an integral component in this research, completing the ethics application, conducting interviews, analyzing data, and writing the thesis myself – of course I had help, but the work is undoubtedly subjective to what I liked or did not like, what I noticed, and what I thought needed to be emphasized. To address this, I share my own thinking throughout the research process.

The actual voices of the participants heavily influence the thesis. In keeping with feminist practice, this thesis is largely informed by direct quotes from interviews, and aims to give voice to those who are often denied such: Adolescent girls, mocked for their gender, patronized for their age, sometimes judged for their race, bodies, sexuality, or any other number of factors are given a space to be heard in this body of work. Of course, I have selected the specific words that are shared, and it is inevitable that I have influence on how they are heard. My impact on the research is discussed in more depth in my Methodology chapter.

In weaving girls' voices into my thesis, I try to bridge a gap between youth and academia. Unfortunately, much of what is written is inaccessible (both physically, due to location, and intellectually, due to complexity, jargon, and theoretical background) to youth. When I embarked upon this research project, I had high hopes that it would become more than an academic paper: that it might reach back to participants, that it may be used to effect change on a governmental level, that adolescent girls everywhere might grab hold of the information and push their teachers and administrators to offer them something similar. I still hold to these activist aspirations and hope to take this project further, beyond academia and into government policies, teaching associations, high schools, and young minds. However, this particular document *is* an academic work. The findings may reach further, but they, and this document, are necessarily rooted in the university academy.

This thesis discusses the academic context informing the study, as well as the findings, in detail. Post-structuralism is applied throughout the thesis, which relies on the

tenet that discourse has the capacity to shape individuals' lived realities. The school at which the study was conducted provides a discursive context to understand, problematize, and challenge.

Doing a case study allowed me to procure a close understanding of one course's impact on female students. In such an unexplored field, the research opens up a whole field of opportunity and brings up many more questions than it answers. I spoke only with girls who took the course – what about boys who took it? Girls who did not? What sort of Gender Studies courses do different schools offer? How do the different classes compare? These are questions that cannot be answered in this work, but which can be considered and opened up by the present work, for the future.

Organization of the Thesis

This thesis begins with a review of the relevant historical and current literature in Chapter Two. I consider the early texts from the 1970s which discuss incorporating Women's Studies into the high school curriculum, as well as more recent texts and movements focused on the same goal. Although these sources speculate that such a course would have multiple benefits for girls, virtually no work has been done to confirm or refute these suppositions in North America or elsewhere.

In light of this absence, a review of literature regarding struggles faced by adolescent girls (both past and present) is relevant. However, though research on adolescent girls can lead to an informed hypothesis about the beneficial nature of high school Women's Studies courses, there is still a lack of concrete research to support such claims. There are numerous questions left unanswered, and this research in Western

Canada offers possibilities to address these questions.

The style of research methodology applied in studies of adolescent girls has evolved since the initial studies were conducted in the early 1980s. Breakthrough studies relied on interview responses to develop general theories about adolescent girls as a somewhat homogeneous group. More recent research has built upon the foundation laid by these studies, integrating intersectionality to look at various situations impacting girls' widely diverse experiences. Recent research also tends to employ increasingly complex research methods, where researchers are able to spend significant amounts of time with participants to gain a deeper understanding of what matters to adolescent girls.

Time, financial, and space constraints prevented me from conducting in-depth, long term research; therefore my methods are similar to studies conducted in the 1980s. Despite my appreciation for and desire to conduct a study that allows such a close examination and understanding of girls' experience and the diversity therein, practical limitations prevented me from doing so. Nevertheless, I employed strong anti-oppressive feminist methods throughout the study. Chapter Three details the methods I used to gather data, including the complex ethical dilemmas involved when working with underage participants. Detailed information on how contact was made, the way in which interviews were conducted, and reflexive analysis are included in this chapter.

It is impossible to adequately assess a program without understanding the context in which it is offered. In light of this, the stage for the research is set in Chapter Four, detailing both the high school and the community it serves. The presence of school bullying and prejudice became apparent during my first visit to Vista view; therefore, how

they manifest, their impact on students, and the institutional response are discussed from a feminist standpoint. Gender-based bullying is a particularly pervasive aspect of the school, and participants' reaction to this is detailed. Further, negative prejudices throughout the community of Vista View are considered. Finally, positive school spirit and steps taken to keep the school welcoming are also discussed.

The actual Women's Studies course is described in Chapter Five, where the official written curriculum is used to supplement student and teacher descriptions of the class. The 15 year history and rationale of the course are also detailed. Course topics and their impact on girls are detailed. The unique, anti-oppressive format of the class is also considered and noted for its importance to the course's success in meeting the objectives laid out in the curriculum. Finally, a description of the course instructor is given. Understanding how she influences the class is important not only to grasp how girls experience the curriculum, but to also consider how other teachers might have similar successes in their own offering of such a course.

Chapter Six discusses the myriad benefits Women and/or Gender Studies had for interview participants. This chapter uses interview stories to demonstrate the various ways that Women's Studies has positively impacted participants' lives. Benefits due to the unique anti-oppressive style of education employed are discussed. Increases to girls' knowledge base and their ability to critically assess their surroundings are also considered benefits of taking the class. Perhaps most significantly, interview participants shared having increased confidence and being empowered by Women's Studies. They speak of bright futures inspired by examples of women from the past and the present. Another

indicator of the benefits brought by attendance in the class is that every single participant suggested that the class should be more widely available.

An innovative class such as Women's Studies clearly brings many benefits to female students. Unfortunately, the unique nature of the class also brings potential for unusual consequences. Chapter Seven explores a few drawbacks of the class. Girls may experience increased vulnerability due to the open, sharing atmosphere that makes the class so unique. Further, difficult topics, such as violence against women and abortion, are frequently discussed in class, the exposure to which can cause girls to feel fearful, sad, or angry. Girls may forget to be respectful during such discussions. Finally, the girls offer several suggestions for possible improvements to the course. These are discussed to highlight ways in which future course shortcomings might be made less problematic.

Theoretical discussion ensues in Chapter Eight. To complement and enrich a feminist perspective advocating empowerment, a melding of anti-oppressive education theory with post-structural identity theory provides a fruitful backdrop for understanding how Women's Studies can help girls develop into strong, self-sufficient young women. First discussed separately in relation to girls, the theoretical stances are woven together in a final section to demonstrate the double impact of Women's Studies as both affecting the discourse surrounding girls, and their personal identities within that discourse. Finally, implications are discussed. Suggestions for future research, recommendations for steps to take from here, and final comments are presented. This thesis provides the answer to my research question, in the context of one school that offered the perceptions of the students and teacher of a Women's Studies course.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Traditionally in a thesis literature review, there is separate discussion of the theory and the methods used in previous research. I have chosen to weave these two – a review of both theoretical and methodological literature – together. As educational and feminist researchers know, researching lived experience is a messy process, but it is also a “caring act” where “we want to know that which is most essential to being” (van Manen, 1990, p. 5). Considering how greatly my feminist background impacts the way I conduct research, it is appropriate to mingle discussion of theoretical literature with methodological literature.

Full reports on long term studies conducted in schools by female researchers who, in some ways, became a part of the environment they were researching had the most impact on my research strategy. Due to detailed descriptions of thoughtful research practice, dealing with significant research moments, and respectful writing, books by feminist sociologists Bettie (2003), Pascoe (2007), and Pomerantz (2008) all became personal guides, as well as sources of anticipation of what was to come in the research field.

There is ample research material on adolescent girls in high school, and much on the field of Women's Studies, but very little connecting the two. The current literature leaves a gap in the exploration of how adolescent girls may respond to and benefit from Women's Studies. As I consider the existing literature throughout this chapter, I demonstrate the lack of attention to the important knitting of these two bodies, thus setting the stage for my study of adolescent girls taking Women's Studies. My work will

draw from and ideally create a new synthesis of theoretical approaches to gender, feminism, Women's Studies, and adolescence.

This chapter focuses on the particular studies noted above, and draws on other texts in the diverse fields of Women's Studies, Girlhood Studies, Feminist Sociology, and Education. Perhaps the biggest challenge is that of examining historical materials – studies of girls from the 1980s are hugely relevant in many ways, but outdated in others. The history of this research is detailed to illustrate the depth that is present in this field. The ethnographic and social construction theories and methods applied in early studies are today seen as “simple,” and have evolved to enable the carrying out of more complex studies today. I begin with a brief discussion of adolescence in high school, progress to a more focused look at girls in high school, and then consider feminism and its (ir?)relevancy to young women. I discuss anti-oppressive education and its relation to Women's Studies classes that employ critical pedagogical practices, and finish with a consideration of post-structural identity theories as used in studies of adolescent girls.

High School, Adolescence, and Ageism

While my focus is on girls, it is true that the voices of adolescents in general are often silenced or ignored, and

for today's adolescents, identity development undeniably occurs in a climate of cultural racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, anti-immigrant sentiment, and a host of other negative social forces. (Sadowski, 2008, p. 3)

Even elite adolescents – middle-class, white, straight, able-bodied boys – face ageism.

While the term “adolescent” can encompass anyone from a well-off lesbian black teen to an orphaned white boy living on the streets to a Hispanic girl living in a relatively safe

area of town, adolescents share a certain stigma. Not yet adults, they occupy a strange liminal stage, and are often a source of confusion and frustration among parents, teachers, politicians, and other adults (Valentine, et al., 1998). The diversity of adolescent experience is obfuscated by their membership in the “teenage” category. Experiences and individuality fade from view as adolescents are irritably dismissed as “damn teenagers” (Pomerantz, 2008; Sadowski, 2008)

Adolescence is a relatively new concept, “invented to create a breathing space between the golden age of 'innocent' childhood and the realities of adulthood” (Valentine et al., 1998, p. 4). As good as this sounds, adolescence is not as charmed as it is portrayed. Youth face certain “processes of exclusion” from public spaces (p. 8) and have historically been stereotyped as “potentially delinquent or deviant” (p. 10). Perhaps because of their “Other” status, youth have become a source of interest to researchers in a variety of fields including education, geography, and gender studies (Meyer, 2009; Pascoe, 2007; Skelton & Valentine, 1998;). However, as educational reformer, and activist Meier (2008) eloquently stated, “It still stuns me to realize how much we talk about them [adolescents], but not *with* them” (p. x).

A historical review of the literature shows a progression in research on youth. The initial groundbreaking studies of adolescents conducted in the 1980s developed through the 1990s and 2000s, and expanded into a comprehensive data set detailing a multitude of aspects of young people's lives. Studies now go much further than just an analysis of the impact of the age that distinguishes “adolescents” as a category. Many current researchers take into account the ways in which other factors (such as gender, sexuality, race, ability,

and class) impact youth. Thus, theory surrounding adolescents has become more complex, with academics acknowledging intersectionality and youths' multi-dimensional, fluid identities, and the impact of discourse, subjectivity, and agency (Pomerantz, 2008).

The Role of Gender in High School

Studies indicate that, in general, gender has a huge impact on adolescents' high school experiences. Gendered relations in high schools have evolved with changing social norms and gender identities. In the early 1980s, Stanworth (1981) found that classroom interactions very much validated and solidified societal gender divisions. Teachers were consistently more involved with boys and more concerned for their well being. Further, regardless of academic achievement, teachers expected boys to be successful in future careers, while girls were predicted to become either housewives or, if they were high achievers academically, secretaries. Girls were “relegated to the sidelines” (p. 50) even when they outperformed boys. Just a few years later, Lees (1986) also found that boys monopolized teachers' attention and time, with girls being less visible to the teachers. Towards the end of the 1980s, Riddell (1989) found similar results in a study of gender displays in the classroom. Attention from teachers was not the only thing focused on the boys – their needs and interests also tended to shape the lesson content. The disadvantaging of girls in the classroom had very real consequences for girls' future performance. Stanworth (1981) argued that “toleration by teachers of practices which reinforce the devaluation of girls in their own eyes and those of their classmates, contributes directly to maintenance of the status quo” (p. 56) and pointed out that teachers needed to not only stop engaging in outright verbal sexism within the classroom, but also

actively try to combat everyday practices that devalued girls.

While one would hope circumstances have improved since then, contemporary classrooms have not become much more accepting of liberated women. LeCroy and Mann (2008) note that North America's media-focused society is more dangerous than ever to girls, and that intervention and prevention programs play a role in “addressing critical issues for adolescent girls” (p. 6), which can help them exit adolescence as empowered women. However, such programs may be losing momentum in light of the current concern and attention given to the “‘crisis of masculinity' and 'boys' underachievement'” that has recently been identified as a serious social concern in schools (Skelton & Francis, 2005), a concern all too often expressed in anti-feminist rhetoric. While more females now graduate from high school with qualifications for university, and more women graduate from university in North America, the fact is, boys are also advancing in these areas – girls are just doing it faster. While media has latched on to the idea of boys' underachievement, statistics show the opposite – boys are in fact doing better than ever before (Mead, 2006). This brings up several key issues: Will we always approach achievement as a competition between males and females? Do schools fail boys if boys are improving their graduation levels? Further, do schools fail boys if men still maintain greater economic, social and cultural worth? With men still being more greatly valued than women in our society, perhaps it is still girls who are disadvantaged, since schools fail to educate them about these societal dynamics.

Despite the popular assumption that girls have it all, this misinformed backlash against feminism – against girls and women themselves – is taking place at a time when

girls are facing greater challenges and being bombarded by sexist media more than ever (LeCroy & Mann, 2008). Achieving self-confidence is often an unrealistic goal. However, as Plan Canada (2011) points out, “When a girl is educated, nourished and protected, she shares her knowledge and skills with her family and community, and can forever change the future of a nation” (np). While this may sound romanticized, it nevertheless rings true in that “research has shown that socioeconomic status, family structure, and parental involvement are related to a range of achievement outcomes for children and adolescents” (Giordano et al, 2008). Girls who are given a 'fair chance' (with adequate nourishment, education, safety, and support) and the tools needed to succeed, do succeed. Further, girl rights are human rights (Plan Canada, 2011), and there is no reason for girls to live with doubt, suffer emotional neglect, or live in fear. Empowerment of young women is beneficial to themselves and their surrounding communities.

Gender-based bullying plays a strong role in day-to-day life in high schools. Meyer (2009) argues that while bullying itself is a huge problem, “most bullying studies and intervention programs do not explicitly address issues related to gender and sexual orientation, which often allows these forms of harassment to persist” (p. x). She points out that the inaction of teachers against gendered harassment in turn teaches students that the school, and by learning and association, larger society, condone gendered harassment. Studies show that, in order to protect themselves from becoming targets of homophobic harassment, many young men feel the need to participate in some form of (hetero)sexual harassment of females (Kehler, 2007; Meyer, 2009; Pascoe, 2007). Further, teachers “curried boys' favour by catering to their senses of humour, often at the expense of girls'

dignity” (Pascoe, 2007, p. 38). Thus, while the impact of gendered identity has changed with time, boys nevertheless continue to be over-valued in relation to girls. There has been continuity in gendered power relations, despite the passing of time and changes in the way girls' bodies are sexualized.

Girls are not the only ones targeted by gendered harassment: To be a “proper,” masculine “guy,” young men are expected to display overt homophobia towards gay men, and frequently target each other for effeminate behaviour in order to solidify their own heterosexuality (Pascoe, 2007). While gay rights activism took off in the 1970s in Canada, attention to homophobia in high schools has only become widespread in the last decade, and by no means has homophobia disappeared from high schools. Sadowski (2008) points out that while there is currently an increased acceptance of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and queer youth, harassment and risk remain a strong force in their lives. A hostile school climate – where physical harassment, verbal abuse, sexual assault related to sexuality, and the phrase “that's so gay” are pervasive (p. 121) – contributes to a risk of depression, substance abuse, and suicide in these students.

Lesbian teens face a unique form of gender-based bullying. Pseudo-lesbianism (the displaying of lesbian sex for consumption by the heterosexual male viewer) has become rampant in the porn industry. Predictably, Pascoe (2007) found that high school lesbians face sexualization by boys and become a source of male fantasies (p. 119). Rather than have their sexual preference respected, these girls face perhaps increased male objectification despite their lack of interest in heterosexual romance (p. 120). Further, Pascoe (2007) found that politically-aware lesbians who actively spurn objectification

face harsh sanctions from their peers as well as from the school administration.

The vast body of research conducted on adolescent gender and sexuality indicates that gender and sex are of high interest in high school – not only to researchers, but also students, parents, and school staff. As children transition into adulthood, their genders become more visible as well as more significant in their day-to-day lives (Pascoe, 2007). Girls are expected to behave differently from boys, boys demand teacher attention, and gender-based bullying is pervasive. Boys and girls both suffer from the norms and gender boundaries that limit their freedom to express themselves as they wish. Students' specific life situations will determine the way in which their gender affects their identity and lived experience. This makes the task of reporting on girls' experience rather difficult – there is no single prescribed way that female adolescents experience life. I now turn to research that has provided a base for understanding several of the factors in the high school that may impact a girl as she becomes a woman.

Girls' Experience of Adolescence in High School

At a time when the world was not quite convinced that women could make it in the public “man's” sphere, researchers in the 1980s opened up a new field of study as adolescent girls emerged as a part of the study of adolescents overall. With second-class treatment of grown women still accepted and prevalent, younger women had been invisible in research. Scholars such as Stanworth (1981), Lees (1986), and McRobbie (1991) pushed the boundaries of academia and drew girls in through school studies and discourse analyses. Establishing a girl presence within academic research allowed for an expansion on these early studies. Limited by both a lack of acceptance and a lack of

previous research to draw from, these feminist researchers conducted what today can be considered general studies of girls as an undifferentiated group; at the time, however, to focus on adolescent girls seemed very specific. The studies from the 1980s and early 1990s generalized girl experience, looking at sexism, school, career, and marriage from the presumably white, heterosexual, middle-class, able-bodied view (Lees, 1986, Stanworth, 1981).

Although the progression in research about adolescent girls has been remarkable, the findings from early studies are nevertheless relevant and important today. In the 1980s, relying on interviews and group discussions, Lees (1986) conducted a study of adolescent girls in London high schools, in which she provided a detailed demonstration of the challenges specifically faced by young women. She found that the young women in her study faced day-to-day sexism, but that this was seen as natural and acceptable: “biological and therefore unchangeable” (p. 13). The structure of sexual relations put the girls in what one of them described as a “vicious cycle” (p. 37) where they were expected to be sexually appealing but were simultaneously judged for such behaviour. Students, both male and female, monitored the actions of young women and used insults related to girls' sexual reputation to keep them aware of their social position. A comparable monitoring did not exist for the young men in the school, and girls found that the most effective survival tactic against the attacks was to engage in a monogamous relationship with one boy to “mimic marriage” (p. 45). The students therefore socialized each other to enter adult patriarchal society. Through classroom observation, Riddell (1989) discovered similar conditioning in her study – male camaraderie was established through the

degradation of women, whereas female solidarity was established through traditional domestic activities.

Girls more strongly identified as independent and not needing a man to take care of them as the Riot Grrrl movement took off in the early 1990s. Through underground music communities, informal contact, and the rise of independent, self-published texts known as zines, Riot Grrrl feminist networks spread across the United States and Britain (Leonard, 1998, p. 103). Young women sought to connect with like-minded people and take action. The movement was without leaders or organization; rather, it informally enabled girls to access ideas, support, and inspiration – all from girls their own age. As the movement ebbed and flowed without a central base, it contributed to an ideology of girl capability.

Many adolescent girls of the 1990s (myself included) were, in some way, enabled by this discourse. Girl power – a cliché now exploited by capitalist marketers – encouraged girls to have opinions, access knowledge, accept power, and demand independence. Sub-cultural groups, such as The New Wave Girls, resisted femininity, challenged normativity, and tried out their own alternative practice (Blackman, 1998). While the sub-cultural resistance has declined, something from that era remains: Many girls today do not question their right to follow their dreams of having a career and independence, as perhaps they still did in the 1980s. However, other factors inhibit their success, and while they may be certain of their *right* to succeed, many doubt their *capability* (Bettie, 2003).

Despite advances made over the last century, self-doubt in adolescent girls is exacerbated by media, peers, teachers, and other adults. Rivers-Moore (2001) points out

that “high school is the worst place for women to be” because they are ignored, interrupted, ridiculed, and condescended (p. 61). The above-mentioned “girl power” has been made superficial by capitalist marketers and has perpetuated a “shallow notion of female empowerment” (Ahn, 2001, p. 120) that in reality leaves girls with little support in a world that demands much from them. Even support from those experiencing similar struggles – other teen girls – is hard to come by, since “high school is a time of immense competition between women” (Rivers-Moore, 2001, p. 59) – a period of “four years of girls competing rather viciously for the borderline-abusive sexual attention of the boys” where there is “little solidarity among girls” (Banks, 2001, p. 290).

Many would dismiss this problem in the same way that adolescent issues in general are dismissed; the phrase, uttered with hopeless disappointment and the shake of a patronizing head: “kids these days” has become a defense mechanism used by adults who do not wish to take responsibility for the way their youth are turning out. In fact, Pomerantz (2008) posits that “many people feel justified in disparaging the things that girls do” (p. 35) and choose to ignore the way that girls are “positioned as commodities in the competitive (meat) market of the dating world” (p. 43). Pascoe (2007) points out that heterosexuality has become normalized as predatory, with girls as prey, often of older boys and men. LeCroy & Mann (2008) agree, arguing that western culture is more dangerous to girls now than in the past. In a world where “girls are trained to think the only power they have is their purchasing power” (Pomerantz, 2008, p. 43) and where they are discredited and discounted before they even open their mouths, is it any wonder that they compete amongst each other for what little power, however superficial it may be,

they can find?

Girls also bear the burden, not only of self-control, but of “managing” boys. Sexual morality has been placed on girls (Pomerantz, 2008, p. 8). Boys are often permitted to behave irresponsibly, and any injury they inflict on themselves and others is frequently excused because “boys will be boys.” Meanwhile, girls not only miss out on this luxury, but in fact bear an added burden since the responsibility escaped by boys is shifted to girls' shoulders; for example, in 2011 we are told – by a Toronto Police officer – that “women should avoid dressing like sluts in order not to be victimized” (Kwan, 2011, np). Rather than question why boys have wronged girls, the usual response is to wonder what girls have done to cause someone to wrong them. Such a hostile social environment hardly lends itself to girls feeling confident or empowered. Thus, one of the few options left in high school is to compete for male affection in order to access status positions.

Just as Lees found in 1986, one way for girls to gain male favour today continues to be making oneself sexually available. However – again, just as in 1986 – girls continue to be labeled as sluts for being sexually active, and boys continue to earn praise for such behaviour (Pascoe, 2007). This double standard, along with the related virgin/whore dichotomy, has been handed down for many years. It continues to hold true today and continues to place girls in a bind that is nearly impossible to successfully maneuver: They must sexually please the boys, but must not be sexually active; they are labeled virgins or whores, with no space between.

Intersectionality in Girl Experience

All girls may be subject to some form of gendered harassment such as a close

monitoring of sexual behaviour. However, girls do not experience this as a homogenous group. As I write about girl experience I want to stress that I do not mean so-called “typical,” white, middle-class girls struggling to make it in a man's world. Instead, I draw attention to girls diverse backgrounds, where different oppressions may intersect to impact girls' lives in specific ways. For example, a black lesbian will face an added dimension of social judgment as compared to a white lesbian. Poverty, (dis)ability, emotional scarring – any number of factors might be impacting girls' lives.

I cannot express the diversity of girl experience, and I do not wish to mock girls by simply naming other sources of oppression; rather, I hope to allude to the dynamic and fluid nature of girls' lives as they all, in their own way, get through each day in an antagonistic world. Mitchell (2001) argues that “society does not look to marginalized groups as examples when it sets rules about who deserves to succeed, and often those groups are misrepresented in the media” (p. 222). Furthermore, Bettie (2003) points out that other than gender, “othering” factors such as class and race are thought of as male, and that girls dealing with such processes are made invisible in a male-focused society. She found that teachers showed distaste for girls who did not meet normative standards (such as coming from a middle-class family) and had little patience for “different” (read: non-white, non-middle class, non-heterosexual, etc) means of self-conduct.

Past and present research shows that high school is not only a challenging time for girls, but can also be unsafe and damaging. Young women are sexually harassed at school (Lees, 1986; Pascoe, 2007), have their bodies objectified (Riddell, 1989; Pomerantz 2008) and are degraded for choosing non-traditional career paths (Rogers & Garrett, 2002).

Even when they creatively find ways to resist the oppressions which serve to hold them back, their strategies are mocked or demonized. Girls' experiences of ageism, sexualization, racism, homophobia, ablism, classism, and othering experiences connect in diverse ways to create unique, but often hostile, high school environments through which they must navigate.

Feminism for Young Women and Women's Studies in High Schools

Research suggests that critical feminist analysis may be used as an effective tool by girls as they navigate these pivotal four years (Froschl & Weinbaum, 1981; Metha & Rothchild, 1985; Mills, 2006). Nakkula (2008) posits that many young people lack access to caring, adult role models and that “schools must make explicit efforts to reach out and engage [students] beyond the basic curriculum” (p. 20). However, the literature shows that responsibility cannot fall solely on the shoulders of already overburdened schools (Anagnostopoulos et al, 2009; Alberta Teacher's Association, 2010). Thus researchers, academics, and policy makers have worked to establish guidelines and strategies to assist in understanding how to effectively and safely bring adolescents to healthy and confident adulthood. Many suggest strategies concerned teachers can put to use (for example, see The Alberta Teachers' Association, 2010), others point out policies and programs that could be put in place by school boards to guide and assist teachers (Anagnostopoulos et al, 2009; Ginsberg et al, 2000), and others simply investigate and critique the status quo while leaving suggestions open for others.

MacLeod (1995) points out that “schools are one useful site for social change” and that “necessary to any kind of social change is an education that 'fosters a critical

understanding of social problems and their structural changes” (cited by Bettie, 2003, p. 203). She argues that schools are obligated to prepare students for global citizenship, and that critical awareness is an essential part of this preparation. Furthermore, a healthy self-concept can be nurtured in school. Nakkula (2008) posits that for teachers to encourage the positive development of identity, they must recognize the importance of their relationships with students. Schools must also “be rich in engaging activities in which students can invest their psychic energy” (p. 19). Much of the published literature shows that traditional teaching methods are not the most effective for healthy development of identity in adolescents (Mills, 2006; Sadowski, 2008, Stantworth, 1981). Additionally, Galley (2008) writes “it is important for educators to consider some of the patterns that researchers have observed in the different learner identities of boys and girls,” (p. 87). Thus, while it is widely known that high school can be a problematic place for many adolescents, gender expectations cause specific challenges that are often not addressed by the school system.

Turbo Chicks: Talking Young Feminisms, a compilation by Mitchell et al. (2001) of words written about feminism by women under age 25, adeptly demonstrates the relevancy of feminism to girls' lives. Including stories of first acquaintance with feminism, feminist activism, “brainy” girls, body image, and identity, these young women demonstrate the relevance of feminism in their lives. The broad range of voices included in the book indicate that feminism has meaningfully reached a variety of young women in Canada. While it is a fun and empowering read, it is not a mainstream work. This is likely because “there is resistance to the feminist label” from many young women who are

understandably concerned about appearing socially “acceptable” (Traister, 2005, np), and avoiding the consequences of failing to appear so.

In fact, Rogers and Garrett (2002) indicate that there is a significant fear of feminism and Women's Studies because some people see it as posing a threat “to their advantages and social status” (p. 132). Even though “a world based on feminist understandings will be a world with a larger, sturdier safety net”(p. 133), not only the hyperprivileged, but also those with more minimal advantages, or a combination of oppressed and oppressor roles, are invested in holding on to what privilege they have.

However, fear of Women's Studies is not always about a loss of privilege. In *The Journal Project*, a study of young women's first experiences with Women's Studies, a fear of knowledge was discovered:

One reason I'm afraid of Women's Studies is because I feel like I'm on the brink of knowing something; and having once understood, nothing will be quite the same. (Putnam et al, 1995, p. 27)

Awareness can be frightening. Perhaps this ties back to the need to appear socially acceptable: In our patriarchal society, it is considered “un-feminine” to be a high achiever (Rogers and Garrett, 2002). Further, being politically informed might make it difficult to be appropriately complacent (another key to societal approval). However, Mills (2006) argues that:

At a time when young women are bombarded with pornographic messages gone mainstream, in a society where raunch culture is cited as “the new feminism,” in a decade when even prominent feminists recognize that the women’s movement is experiencing a dangerous backlash, it is more important than ever to provide students with a curriculum which equips them with a sense of integrity, entitlement, and empowerment. (p. 3)

Thus, where girls are seeking approval from an oppressive, patriarchal society laden with

unhealthy and unrealistic expectations of women, it remains vitally important that they be provided with the tools to develop their own strong confidence and sense of self.

Women's Studies has the potential to provide such an unusual opportunity:

An entire semester devoted to the study of issues affecting women historically, politically, and globally gives teachers the rare chance to dig deeply into topics which the traditional curriculum only grazes. (Mills, 2006, p. 3)

Offering Women's Studies in high schools is not a new idea. As early as 1976, Howe wrote that “no one knows when the earliest high school feminist course was given, or where” (p. viii-ix). In the 1970s, curricula were developed in response to studies that found high school textbooks omitted women or placed them in supplemental sections, that literature studied in schools was characterized by “maleness,” that females were given secondary status – portrayed as cooks, malicious, panicky, or dim-witted in school books, and that poor role models were given for girls, which resulted in harmful lessons for both boys and girls (Arlow and Froschl, 1976).

Following a comprehensive study of sexual divisions in the classroom in the late 1970s, Stanworth (1981), relying on classroom observations and teacher interviews, emphasized the “importance of positive action programmes” and the need to “overhaul a curriculum that has, for generations, devalued women and their concerns” (p. 59). She pointed out there was a strong need for resources specifically geared towards empowering girls, and that schools

could consider making a space for girls-only groups within mixed schools, where girls could share experiences and work out for themselves constructive ways of dealing with gender inequality and sexual harassment. (p. 59)

The 1970s saw an emergence of Women's Studies resource guides (Department of

Education, 1974, Centre for Continuing Education, 1976). However, by 1981, Froschl & Weinbaum found that very few Women's Studies courses had actually reached high school classrooms, “even though the damaging effects of existing sexism in educational materials has been documented widely” (p. 12). In response to this lack of change, a series of books entitled “Women's Lives/Women's Work” were developed for use in the high school classroom, and a project was set up throughout the United States to enable over 100 teachers to both use these new resources in their classrooms and develop their own curricula “to challenge the male bias of their institutions” (p. 13). Despite administrative resistance, disrespect from some male students, and personal time requirements, many teachers made good use of the material with very gratifying results – particularly with racialized girls. The study found that not only the curricula, but also the approach taken by each teacher, were instrumental in achieving success with the woman-focused curricula. Overall, the results of the project indicated that “with materials on women that are relevant to students' lives, teachers have power to change the classroom – even under adverse circumstances” (p. 16). Generally, research shows that teacher influence is often more important than curricula to effective learning (Galley, 2008; Nakkula, 2008; Ng, 2008)

Despite these positive results, economic restraints and a return by secondary schools to a “back to the basics philosophy ... left little room for any non-traditional curriculum” (Metha & Rothschild, 1985, p. 27). These circumstances forced feminist teachers to get creative in how they might “integrate scholarship on women into the high school curriculum” (p. 27), such as “incorporat[ing] the principles of Women's Studies

into the regular English curriculum” (Ray, 1985, p. 54).

Rather than challenges to high school Women's Studies classes abating, it is the efforts to develop such courses that have declined since the 1970s and 1980s. Today, courses are few and far between and continue to be the locally developed, isolated course offerings of one brave teacher trying to improve her school. An exception is the fairly recent emergence of the Miss G_ Project, which was established in 2005 with the “objective to get a Women's & Gender Studies Course into the Ontario Secondary School Curriculum” (Miss G_ Project, 2010, np.). Largely through the grassroots efforts of the Miss G_ Project, high school courses in Women's and Gender Studies are receiving increased attention in the province of Ontario. However, this has not expanded to other provinces; and has, even in Ontario and despite the best efforts of Miss G_ members, been currently “stalled in the Ministry's editing process” (Miss G_ Project, 2011, np). On the other side of the country, a similar lack is found: Of over 1300 high schools in the three Western-most Canadian provinces, there are currently only five offering a Women's and/or Gender Studies course (British Columbia BAA, 2011; Government of Alberta, 2011; and personal communication with Saskatchewan Education, May 21, 2010).

The rarity of Women's Studies and/or Gender Studies classes in Canada is peculiar. As Miss G_ co-founder Ghabrial so aptly said it,

Why don't you learn about feminism until university? Where has all this information been ... High school is the site of a lot of gender oppression. Why is that still the case after so many years of women's movements and activism? (Cohen, 2006, p. 21)

The Miss G_ Project was formed in response to this absence, and is

dedicated to feminist anti-oppression politics with a strong focus on education, [with a] mandate to provide young people, - especially young

women, transgender, and gender non-conforming youth - with the opportunities, support, and resources necessary to analyze and influence issues that affect their lives and futures. (Miss G_ Project, 2011, np)

Members of the Miss G_ Project believe that educating youth about gender is one way to benefit oppressed groups, stating that

Gender Studies (and closely related disciplines like Women's Studies and Sexuality Studies) is an interdisciplinary field of study that analyzes gender and its inherent intersections with class, race, ability, sexual identity, and location. It recognizes how women of diverse backgrounds have been made invisible through the different and interacting oppressions of traditional education curricula and attempts to uncover their stories across various disciplines. It also offers critical analysis of gender constructions and gender roles and relations and aims to sharpen students' critical awareness of how gender operates in institutional and cultural contexts in their own lives. (Miss G_ Project, 2011, np)

These descriptions and justifications resonate with my own reasons for researching high school Women's/Gender Studies. As outlined above, high school is a critical but exceedingly challenging time for young women. Literature from the past and the present indicates that women-specific curricula have the potential to benefit and empower young women (and all oppressed youth) by arming them with knowledge, confidence, critical awareness, and analytical skills.

However, along with the struggle to get these course offerings integrated into the school systems, a further difficulty arises: With so few courses available and little acceptance of them, it becomes challenging to assess what effect they have on young women today. This is an area that has been overlooked in available research, and while this topic is directly related to young women, their voices are not being heard in the discussion surrounding Women's Studies courses in high school. In fact, I was not able to find any research on the impact Women's Studies has on adolescent girls, and certainly

found nothing in girls' own words. My research contributes to filling this gap by going directly to those most affected and hearing what young women, enrolled in one of the five courses in the western provinces, have to say about Women's Studies in high school.

Anti-oppressive Education

Feminist teaching practices and critical pedagogy are pursued within the academy, but have since spread to more diverse fields beyond the privileged university environment. Here, I detail feminist teaching practices as we have seen them in academia, then consider the background and rationale of anti-oppressive education.

Feminist Teaching Practices as Linked to Anti-oppressive Education

Feminist pedagogy is an alternative instruction model founded upon the belief that all human experiences are gendered. Employing feminist teaching practices in the university classroom is a way for feminist academics to put their theoretical standpoint into action. It is an effort to get away from the traditional classroom style, since traditional university practices do not fit well with feminist theory or practice (Crabtree & Sapp, 2003). Feminist pedagogy seeks to empower by removing oppressions that come along with structures in the university institution. By providing students with critical analytical skills, feminist pedagogy strives to promote social change. Feminist pedagogy holds a liberatory vision for the classroom where teachers and students interact equally, with a democratic and passionate style (Sandell, 1991).

There are many different ways of employing feminist pedagogy in the classroom. Radical pedagogical practices and feminist pedagogical practices include alternative grading schemes, a cultivation of dialogue in the classroom, promotion of social activism,

and the empowerment of students. Ng (2008) argues for a "more holistic pedagogical endeavour that explicitly acknowledges the interconnectedness of our mind, body, emotion, in the construction and pursuit of knowledge" (p. 1). Such practices face conservative opposition both inside and outside the academy.

Feminist pedagogy is closely linked with critical pedagogy. Paulo Friere was a pioneer in critical pedagogy in the 1960s. He advocated education that would allow the oppressed to take a role in their own liberation. He famously argued,

No pedagogy which is truly liberating can remain distant from the oppressed by treating them as unfortunates and by presenting for their emulation models from among the oppressors. The oppressed must be their own example in the struggle for their redemption. (Freire, 1970, p. 54)

Friere's ideas are still important in today's feminist teaching practices.

Feminist teaching seeks a progression from student identification of social problems, to their understanding of them. From there, students learn to respond to problems through action. Throughout the process, students can hopefully achieve self-actualization, emancipation, and empowerment. Any assignments in classes using feminist teaching practices encourage growth and understanding, and help students develop skills in praxis and critical thinking (Bonifacio, 2011; Snowdon, 2004).

Classrooms with feminist teaching practices make use of dialogue, discussion, and participation. Furthermore, individual experiences are acknowledged as important, and become a source of learning.

Feminist pedagogy aims to counter practices of exclusion, chauvinism and traditional learner/teacher dichotomies within the traditional academic institution. There are many constraints within academia, including lecture size, expectations regarding

research output, class layout, marginalization of fields using critical/feminist pedagogy, power imbalances, and traditional, accepted university practices that are in opposition to feminist teaching practices (Crabtree & Sapp, 2003). Nevertheless, feminist scholars endeavour to operationalize unique teaching practices to encourage growth for themselves, their students, and the academy in which they work (Ng, 2008; Sandell, 1991).

Studies (Webber, 2006) have found that feminist pedagogy presents challenges (such as experiencing crisis through learning, maneuvering complicated logistics, and implementing alternative grading schemes) to both instructor and students, but that the rewards reaped from meeting those challenges are significant. Students tend to experience a growth and maturation not typically seen in traditional university courses. Further, community involvement and advocacy are more prominent in feminist pedagogical courses. Finally, students tend to find they take more away from such a course – practical skills, increased confidence, new connections, and networks – than they typically gain from traditional course assignments.

Though feminist pedagogy has been employed in such diverse fields as psychology, sociology, and theatre, it is most frequently observed in university Women's and Gender Studies departments. Much of what we see at work in feminist pedagogy, however, can also be observed in the more far-reaching field of anti-oppressive education.

What is Anti-Oppressive Education?

Though anti-oppressive education can take diverse forms, it is most simply described as any form of education that works against oppression. The theory assumes

that education can be crafted to empower students – particularly those who are dis-empowered by current educational systems. Typically used in the fields of social work and education, anti-oppressive education has much in common with critical and feminist pedagogy. Oppression comes in many forms: racism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, and classism are only a few such forces. Innovative educators have developed ways to fight against these forces. Despite advances made in the field, anti-oppressive education remains an unusual form of instruction, and is rarely recognized as a viable supplement (let alone alternative) to traditional forms of education.

Kumashiro (2000), a renowned researcher, teacher, and activist in the field of anti-oppressive education, describes four approaches to anti-oppressive education:

- 1) education for the Other
- 2) education about the Other,
- 3) education that is critical of privileging and othering, and
- 4) education that changes students and society.

Each of these approaches has strengths and weaknesses, and can benefit from a deeper consideration of the multiplicity and fluidness of oppression. Understanding Kumashiro's four types of anti-oppressive education provides a sense of the field's depth and impact, and of the challenges faced by anti-oppressive educators.

Education for the Other “focuses on improving the experiences of students who are Othered, or in some way oppressed, in and by main-stream society” (Kumashiro, 2000, p. 26). This approach recognizes that some students have different needs, and embraces such diversity. At the same time, however, it stunts diversity in that it compartmentalizes

difference into specific groups: A “different, like *this*” mentality may allow for difference, but still creates definite boundaries, when reality is fluid and shifting. Further, this approach assumes teachers are able to accurately assess their Othered students' needs, which is not a safe assumption (Kumashiro, 2000).

Education about the Other focuses on “what all students – privileged and marginalized – know and should know about the Other” by including “specific units on the Other” and integrating Otherness into the curriculum (Kumashiro, 2000, p. 31-33). Unfortunately, this approach can lead to thinking of the “Other as the expert” (p. 34), where students end up speaking on behalf of all who share a specific difference. In addition, a dominant narrative might emerge, one that essentializes the experience of the Other. Finally, a full knowledge is unattainable, and “it is literally impossible to teach only adequately about every culture and every identity, especially given the multiplicity of experiences within any cultural community” (p. 34).

In *Education that is Critical of Privileging and Othering*, everyone involved examines “not only how some groups and identities are Othered ... but also how some groups are favored, normalized, privileged, as well as how this dual process is legitimized and maintained by social structures and competing ideologies (Kumashiro, 2000, p. 35-36). This approach brings deeper understanding and seeks change. Unfortunately, the idea that oppression is structural in nature suggests that the effects of oppression are universal, regardless of individuality. Further, it assumes that once people are critically aware, they will become actively involved in bringing about “social transformation” (p. 38), which is certainly not always the case; some people may recognize their personal privilege, but not

feel the need to fight for equality. Finally, the

goal of consciousness-raising puts into play a modernist and rationalist approach to challenging oppression that is actually harmful to students who are traditionally marginalized in society ... the rationalist approach to consciousness-raising assumes that reason and reason alone is what leads to understanding. However, rational detachment is impossible. (p. 39)

The final approach, *Education that Changes Students and Society*, holds that “oppression is the citing of harmful discourses and the repetition of harmful histories” (Kumashiro, 2000, p. 40). In addition to being aware and critical of oppression, students must get actively involved in changing the way we talk about privilege, oppression, and oppressed groups, if we are to see true change. When enough activists become involved in creating new, healthy discourses, positive change will occur. While this approach can effect change, it assumes that there is only one direction that progress can take, and that there is an assuredness to education – that education has a specific outcome.

Ultimately, Kumashiro (2000) argues that anti-oppressive education “cannot be about repetition and affirmation of either the student's or teacher's knowledge, but must involve uncertainty, difference, and change” (p. 44); in this, students may need to work through crisis since “learning about oppression and unlearning one's worldview can be upsetting and paralyzing to students,” and “educators need to create a space in their curriculum for students to work through crisis” (p. 44).

Post-Structural Identity Theory

Cultural theorist Hall² (1996) explained identity as both meaningful and necessary, but as placed “under erasure” (p. 1), to indicate that it is loaded with problematic

2 Feminists, notably girlhood theorist and sociologist Pomerantz (2008), have built upon identity theories. Here I make use of a feminist application of Hall's identity theories because classroom interactions during girlhood are aptly understood through a dual acknowledgement of discourse and personal agency.

meanings that no longer hold relevancy. The word, however, is not obsolete, since it provides “a valuable way to theorize the relationship between self, Other, and society” (Pomerantz, 2008, p. 12). Identity is rooted in humanistic thought, which presents it as “a stable category that defines an individual's essence or core being” (p. 12). Unfortunately, this ignores how we are acted *upon*; really, “the subject is far from complete and stable”: We are fluid and partial, and our identities are “shaped by discourse,” but “not wholly determined by it” (p. 13). Identity is the “suture” between discourse and subjectivity (Hall, 1996, p. 5-6): While discourse does indeed impact each girl (and all people) greatly, she is still, in some way, her own person.

Using a feminist application, Pomerantz (2008) relies heavily on Hall's discussion of identity, because, she argues, “using the word identity enables me to discuss both the fixity and the fluidity of girls' identity talk, capturing the doubleness of discourse and subjectivity” (p. 14). She explored cultural texts used by girls to negotiate and perform their identities “while focusing on the school as a constituting institution that positions girls in specific (gendered, raced, classed) ways” (p. 21). High school, then, is one significant area of discourse that informs girls as they negotiate through adolescence. At the same time, however, they are personally involved in their behaviour: While there is no pure, unaffected “core being,” there is nevertheless *something* inside each person that affects how discursive structures alter them.

Further, the identity of a person, while not some romanticized 'essence,' is not completely determined by environment. Rather, identity is a combination of surroundings and 'what's inside.' Girls are certainly impacted by their high school and all of its

discursive components. The effects of the institution and the activities that keep it operating in a specific manner undoubtedly inform girls' behaviour. However, they also have a *self* informing their behaviour. Neither one, nor the other, is entirely responsible for each girl's identity – rather, they work together (Pomerantz, 2008).

The theory of identity, described above, exemplifies the in-betweenness of post-structuralism: Allowing for fluidity, contradiction, uncertainty, and paradox, post-structuralism avoids reducing complex realities to simple theories. In theorizing, some reduction is unavoidable, and is in fact desirable for general understanding. However, ignoring the complexity that is life in order to present a tidy theory leaves much of the picture unpainted. Very little in the world is black and white, and post-structuralism allows us to paint theories in colour.

Foundations Laid

The foundation laid in earlier works enabled more recent scholars, including those whose studies so significantly informed my own, to take on more complex issues. For example, Bettie (2003) problematizes more than adolescence and gender, considering the way that girls' experiences of these intersect with race and class. Alternatively, Pomerantz (2008) applied Hall's (1986) complex notion of identity as the link between discourse and subjectivity to her findings regarding girls' style choices. Pascoe (2007) developed an understanding of the impact masculinity has on adolescents' behaviour by applying queer theory and ethnic studies to her findings.

All of these recent studies involved a researcher spending significant periods of time with students, getting to know their daily routines, their friends, their preferred

courses, etc. Compared to earlier studies, where interviews and observations were conducted with more distance from the participants, the methodological shift allowed current researchers to become a part of the school scene for several months; usually at least a full school year. Earlier studies saw researchers as someone separate. While they may have been friendly with the girls' best interests at heart, they nevertheless were outside experts, there to collect information via interviews (like myself). The later studies, on the other hand, saw a “blurring of this boundary between participant observation and formal interviewing” (Bettie, 2003, p. 28) as researchers 'hung out' with participants in a variety of ways – at the mall, on the phone, skipping class.

Anti-oppressive education is an important and innovative form of education. Still quite rare, it is becoming more common in universities. The high school Women's Studies class researched and described throughout this thesis is most certainly a form of anti-oppressive education. Theory from this field of study informs both my research style and my analysis of the course. In the next chapter, I detail anti-oppressive research strategies employed in the collection of data.

Chapter Three: Ethical Feminist Methodology

Anti-Oppressive Research Method

A review of the literature has shaped my decisions regarding methodology. Again, rather than separating theories and methods, I have woven that which I have done with my theoretical reasoning. Although I begin with a review of my theoretical guidelines, feminist theory continues to be strongly tied to methods throughout the entire chapter.

Despite the fact that structural limitations prevented me from conducting a study as in depth as those of Bettie (2003), Pascoe (2007), and Pomerantz (2008), the methods employed by these researchers provided inspiration and guidelines. An anti-oppressive research praxis was chosen; the implications and reasons for this will be discussed in the first section. This will be followed by a detailing of the preparations needed to begin the research, then a record of the data collection processes. Information on numbers of interviews can be found in the next section, followed by details on participant population and inclusivity. The analysis process I employed is described, followed by an extensive section discussing the many ethical issues involved in this study.

Taught in a small high school of approximately 250 students, the Women's Studies course goes against the grain of the school, eschewing traditional teaching methods in favour of discussion circles, role play, and learning parties. It, predictably, makes women its focus by looking at such diverse topics as women in the media, the herstory of women, and women in other cultures (as opposed to much of the current public school curricula, which tends to omit women's issues). The woman-centredness and innovative teaching style of the course is an example of the anti-oppressive education discussed in Chapter

Two. The synthesis between the anti-oppressive, feminist course format and my own anti-oppressive feminist research style enabled a comfortable atmosphere during interviews – transcripts, comments, and body language indicated that participants and I were generally “on the same page” and at ease with each other.

A challenge arose in maintaining confidentiality and anonymity. Given that there are so few courses of this nature across Canada, and the need for honest responses from the participants, ethical practices preclude giving their names (most still in adolescence), the school, the teacher, or the district being identified. Because it is the only high school in a small town, it was necessary that I come up with a pseudonym for the town (Vista View) and the high school (Vista View High). Further, I randomly assigned pseudonyms to participants. I wanted participants to have names so their quotes could be connected by readers and to avoid dehumanizing them. “Participant 1” seems too clinical, and while Wanda may not be her real name, I hope readers get a sense of what a great, thoughtful person “Wanda” is.

Theoretical Guidelines: Emancipatory Research

From the project's conceptual beginnings, I approached the research with feminist intentions. I drew from the work of Michelle Fine (1992), a distinguished professor of social personality psychology, who argues that in order to avoid reproducing the oppressive silences that are present in social science, we must take a critical and activist stance in our work. Fine points out that while there is resistance in academia to subjective work that is not positivist, it is our ethical responsibility to push back against these institutional constraints and ensure we treat our research participants respectfully, and

avoid taking their data and running away with it. Feminists have critiqued positivism because

male social science researchers had a) claimed objectivity by non-involvement in social problems, by distancing themselves from the human subjects of their research and by not informing them - or even misinforming them - about the goals of their research projects; b) they had claimed scientific truth for their theories by imitating the quantitative methods of the natural sciences though their results had frequently been blatantly untrue and biased against women and used as 'scientific' license to harm women. (Buber Agassi, ND, p. 2)

Hesse Biber et al. (2004) write that “many feminists conceptualize truth differently than mainstream researchers and assert that women and other marginalized groups can possess knowledge and also recognize that people may not always gather knowledge in the same way” (p. 11). Anti-oppressive initiatives aim to “eradicate the injustices” that oppressive relations produce and reproduce in daily life – be it in public or private – and “anti-oppressive measures aim to deconstruct and demystify oppressive relations.” (Dominelli, 2002, p. 12-13). As discussed in Chapter Two, adolescents in general, and adolescent girls in particular, experience oppressive relations in high school on a regular basis. Further, they are “othered”: Where maleness is considered normal, female adolescents are the “Other” because of their sex and age, as well as any number of particular characteristics that may be considered “different” in common discourse. Anti-oppressive theory places at the centre and empowers those that are othered and breaks down oppressive relations (Moosa-Mitha, 2005). Thus it is fittingly applied to this particular study – I have already discussed how adolescent girls are certainly “othered” and how anti-oppressive education has the potential to push back against this othering process. As a feminist researcher, I felt it was my duty to do more than only study their anti-

oppressive education; I also applied anti-oppressive research praxis throughout this study, detailed below.

Consistent with the use of anti-oppressive education theory, I employed emancipatory research strategies. I sought to empower participants through the research process by listening to their often unheeded voices, validating their lived experience as significant, writing and sharing their stories, and personally connecting with them through interviews. In the following example, I connected with a participant (something that was likely aided by my own relatively young age) in that we shared a similar experience and commiserated about it:

Angela: There's this one guy where my mom told him I wanted to be a Women's Studies professor. ... He was like, "So your daughter's gay, 'cause she wants to be a feminist."

Auburn: [nodding that I totally get this]

Angela: It makes me mad. And I kind of don't want to tell people that I want to be a professor of Women's Studies, because it will put, a bad name for me, you know?

Auburn: I know! I've been there.

Although this example may seem to indicate that Angela and I are concerned about being labeled gay, we made it clear in other parts of the interview that this was not an issue. Rather, near the end of the interview, we do not even need to explain ourselves since we have established that we see eye-to-eye on the matter: People are ignorant about what feminism is, and erroneously stereotype without being informed. This excerpt demonstrates a mutual understanding between interviewee and interviewer. Further, there is reciprocation – I did not simply absorb Angela's story; rather, I felt the need to confirm during the interview that she is not the only young feminist who has faced these hurdles, and to share in her frustration. Feminist interview strategies value the process of

collaboration between interviewer and interviewee (Rapley, 2004).

The application of anti-oppressive research strategies means that research *subjects* became *participants*, *data* were *stories*, and that the participants were considered the experts (Moosa-Mitha, 2005). In my first interactions with girls, I made it clear through verbal and physical cues that they were not just numbers. I tried to honour participants by carefully listening to and valuing their stories, to give back by briefly sharing my own experiences when this seemed appropriate, and to be transparent about my research goals.

With an anti-oppressive feminist research background, it was clear to me that, while teachers, parents, psychologists, and researchers may have useful information about adolescent girls' minds and tendencies, another types of understanding would be achieved by listening to the words and stories of teenage girls themselves. Such an approach also demonstrated respect towards my participants: Not quite adults, high school girls are rarely asked what is important in their lives. Hearing their stories and giving them voice ensures that my research produces knowledge at a grassroots level, by speaking with those who are truly impacted (the students) rather than focusing on the words of administrators, teachers, and staff. To get a more comprehensive view of the course, I also spoke with the course teacher and other adults involved. However, I felt that the majority of my data must come from speaking with the girls themselves; this is reflected in the number of interviews conducted – for every interview with an adult, I spoke with five girls.

Preparations: Finding Research Site and Participants

Many scholars choose to conduct their research on school grounds. While different locations offer interesting contexts, “school is the single context” where skill and

relationship building occur regularly (Nakkula, 2008, p. 19). Further, once connected, schools provide researchers with access to a large pool of potential research subjects. Other factors also play a part; for example, the presence of the researcher is made non-threatening by coming to adolescents' stomping grounds. As is the case in my research, a specific curriculum and its delivery can best be viewed from within the school itself.

A thorough search indicated that there are few secondary schools offering any alternative gender-based curricula in the three Western-most Canadian provinces. Four schools in British Columbia provide some form of Gender Studies (British Columbia BAA, 2011), but no high schools in Saskatchewan offer such a course (personal communication with Saskatchewan Education, May 21, 2011). The province of Alberta informed me that only one Alberta high school offers Women's Studies to its students, while one city school offers a Social Justice program (Personal communication with Government of Alberta, May 23, 2010). When presenting my preliminary research, I learned, by word of mouth, of a Girl Empowerment program taught in an all-girls school in one of Alberta's major cities. Thus, in all of the approximately 1300 high schools in Western Canada, I was only able to locate (through inquiries to each provincial government) five courses with a specific Gender Studies focus, as well as a couple additional courses which included, but did not focus on, similar material.

I chose to conduct a close case study of one of the public school programs that was specifically designed to provide an understanding of gender dynamics. I was aided in coming to this decision by multiple factors – the difficulties faced in gaining access to high school populations limited the number of schools I could visit; the rarity of the

schools offering such a program left me with few options for where to conduct the research; limited funding made extensive travel difficult; the small scale of a masters thesis and the little time allowed for completion of such prevented me from broadening the study to include other schools; and the complex and “messy” nature of qualitative research did not allow for a crisp and clean survey of multiple schools. Rather, I became focused on taking an in-depth look at one particular course and several of the students who took it. With more time, funding, and resources, this research would have broadened accordingly. Given these restrictions, my work cannot provide comparative analysis.

Before contacting any schools, I completed the ethics application and had it approved by the University of Lethbridge Human Subject Research Committee. I next approached the superintendent of the chosen school division, who responded positively and asked for a copy of the ethics application. Though he was invited to comment on or request changes to my proposal, he did not do so. Interestingly, the superintendent was not sure which school in his district offered the course. Through emails and phone calls to all the high schools in that school division, I discovered which school offered the course and emailed, then phoned, the principal. He gave me the go-ahead along with the email address of the teacher of the course. I emailed her and she responded with some excitement at the interest shown in her course. Over a few weeks, we exchanged several emails and spoke on the phone twice. Shortly after I finally arrived in her town, we met in person for a late supper. I began collecting interview and observation data at school the next morning.

Collecting Qualitative Data

I conducted several in-depth semi-structured individual interviews and small focus groups made up of two to three members. Interviews and focus groups allow researchers to access participant perceptions, opinions, and attitudes. Glesne (1999) depicts the interview process as “making words fly,” where questions “stimulate verbal flights from the important respondents who know what you [the researcher] do not” (p. 67). Kvale (1996) points out that one of the best ways to learn about what people think about something is simply to talk with them:

The qualitative research interview attempts to understand the world from the subjects' point of view, to unfold the meaning of people's experiences, to uncover their lived world prior to scientific explanations (p. 1).

Interviews and focus groups give us insight into what other people think about our topics.

Girls were invited to interview a second time after their first interview or focus group. Feminist researchers such as Reinharz (1992) have found that group interviews allow for a natural flow of information among participants. My research was consistent with this as focus groups garnered richer data as the girls reminded each other of aspects of the class and engaged in excited dialogue and exchange. Interviews and focus groups were aided by an interview guide (see Appendices A and B), but the intended direction of interviews was not written in stone. Participants were invited, before the interview started and occasionally again during the interview, to diverge from set questions or add insights and stories as they saw fit. Participants exercised this freedom most during focus groups where they seemed to feel more comfortable engaging in conversations rather than more formal question and answer periods. While I endeavoured to create a relaxed atmosphere

in both individual interviews and focus groups, girls tended to chatter much more during focus groups, generating increased “thick descriptions” (Geertz, 1973) as they discussed, analyzed and shared memories together. Wilkinson (1998) argues that focus groups are an important part of feminist research practice, as they address ethical concerns about power and facilitate the production of rich, interactive data.

The openness I saw in pairs and groups of three girls is not atypical; in her groundbreaking study of girls in 1986, Lees found that girls tend to have groups of girlfriends and that female friendships are largely based on talking. In this study, girls were welcomed to bring a friend with them to their interviews, which “often seemed to make the girls feel more at ease” (p. 10). More recently, Bettie (2003) and Pomerantz (2008) found that “hanging out” with girls in group settings allowed the researchers to learn about girls' lives in a more intimate and natural way. Noting the success of these studies, I felt giving the girls an option to interview with friends was wise.

Mrs. Brown, the teacher of the course, aided me in gaining parental consent (by sending forms home and collecting them from students) and then helped me connect with the girls during school hours; however, she was not privy to the girls' final decision whether or not to participate. Any girl who took the course in the previous year at the Grade 11 level, and who had parental consent³, was invited to interview. I also spoke with one young woman, recently back from college, who had been in Grade 12 when she took the course. Mrs. Brown introduced me to this participant when the three of us met by chance in the library where I was conducting interviews.

³ In keeping with school practice, Mrs. Brown approached parents for consent and did not share information on the number who either did not respond or refused consent.

Generally, the girls showed enthusiasm and were excited to participate, jumping at the chance to tell their stories. Usually Mrs. Brown would introduce us, but sometimes the girls came to the library and introduced themselves to me. We would retreat to a room in the back of the library, chosen by Mrs. Brown as an appropriate interview location. Once there, I would tell the girls they did not have to participate and could leave whenever they wanted, then move on to explain the study and informed consent to the girls. Focus groups usually arose spontaneously as girls came in pairs or groups of three and asked if they could interview together. I always said yes, and also said if they had something private they wanted to say, we could tack on a few extra minutes alone at the end. All students who I spoke to decided to go forward with the interview; one had forgotten her parental consent form, but was so keen to interview that she phoned her mother on the spot and asked me to speak to her for verbal consent.

After the first interview or focus group, girls were invited to do another (individual) interview about six weeks later, giving them some time to think about their first interview or focus group. Interestingly, none of the girls who started with an individual interview (as opposed to a focus group) completed a follow up interview, and three of the five girls who did agree to speak to me a second time requested doing another focus group. This speaks to the richer conversations and connections that emerged during focus groups: Girls engaged in and enjoyed the research focus groups enough to want to delve even further into their memories of the class. A short, third follow-up interview was also an option available to girls who wished to do so; however, only one of the girls opted to partake in a third interview.

To allow my full attention and interest to be focused on the girls and their stories, I took few notes during interviews, relying on a voice recorder to ensure interviews were preserved. I started the first interview with a casual tone and a few warm up questions, asking what books and television shows the girls were interested in, what they liked to do, and what they thought about school. For example, in one focus group, I began like this:

Just to get an idea, what kind of TV shows are you watching, books are you reading, I just don't know – when I first started this I thought “I'm still young, it's like I'm an adolescent girl,” and then I realized I'm an old woman to you guys already! So what's going on for you?

Once we had warmed up with some relatively safe questions, we began talking about the Women's Studies class and their experiences in the class. I was honestly and openly enthusiastic about the course. After establishing with the girls that it was definitely beneficial, I would ask questions about possible changes that could improve the course. We finished the interview with more personal questions about confidence, oppression, and how Women's Studies affected them personally. I always finished by asking if they had anything else to say, thereby letting them decide what they might want to add. I tried to keep the atmosphere relaxed by being relaxed myself, mildly swearing occasionally, and acknowledging that being recorded might feel awkward:

Auburn: Okay, this is recording, and don't think about – don't worry about it. I say ridiculous things all the time, and then I'm the one that gets to type it up and I'm like “Wow, I sound like an idiot!” [girls laugh] So don't worry.

In another interview, the participant expressed her nervousness by actually greeting the digital recorder:

Auburn: We're recording and I'm with Carly –

Carly: [overlapping] Hi. [laughs nervously].

Auburn: And, it's March 2nd. And don't worry about, like I say the stupidest things on tape. So try not to feel nervous about it because it really doesn't

matter.

Girls had usually relaxed by the time we reached questions about the class. Sometimes, because the class had finished almost a year ago, they had trouble remembering what happened. In focus groups, participants often triggered each others' memories and started a full dialogue, but this was more of a challenge in individual interviews. I tried to jog memories by asking the girls to think more about something they had already mentioned:

Auburn: Can you tell me, like, a favorite memory?

Janelle: [Long pause]. Not really, no. I can like, barely remember.

Auburn: It was a year ago now?

Janelle: Yeah.

Auburn: Yeah, that is a long time.

Janelle: I liked most of it. Yeah. It was fun.

Auburn: What were the discussions like? You mentioned that was kind of a good thing.

Usually these strategies worked, but sometimes they did not. The most effective way to have the girls really open up and engage was to have a two to three member focus group.

Depending both on time spent together and the discussions we engaged in, my connection with each girl was unique. Whether we spent a total of a few hours or a few minutes together, and whether she engaged deeply with me (and her friends), or remained cautious in what she shared – each girl stressed that the course was important, and should be more available both within their own school and elsewhere.

Some additional data became available as past students of the course, hearing about my study from continued acquaintance with a favoured teacher, expressed interest in telling how it has continued to impact their lives. Thus, via secure online forms (see Appendix C), past students were invited to tell their stories, albeit to a lesser degree than the adolescent girls interviewed at Vista View High. These written responses provide

some context and longitudinal analysis (surveys came from students who took the class up to 10 years ago) to supplement the main research interviews.

Participants

Unlike other option courses, which are offered yearly, the Women's Studies course at Vista View High is only offered once every two years due to budget constraints, teaching shortages, and administrative resistance. Mrs. Brown developed the curriculum for grade 12 students. However, the course is offered to both grade 11 and 12 students to ensure all students (male or female) have a chance to study it despite its only being offered bi-annually. Unfortunately, I conducted my study during an “off” year. My main sample population was therefore limited to the 13 students, currently in grade 12, who had taken the class when they were in grade 11. I also happened to meet and interview a 14th Women's Studies classmate, recently back from her first year at college, who had taken the class when she was in grade 12. Therefore, of the 25 students who were in that year's Women's Studies class⁴, I spoke with 14 girls. Five girls did just an individual interview, two took part in both a focus group and an individual interview, three girls partook in one focus group without an individual interview, and three girls took part in two focus groups without any individual interviews. There was overlap between these categories (for example, one of the girls who did just one focus group did that focus group with a friend who took part in another focus group).

Additionally, I contacted a very small sampling of Women's Studies students from the past 10 years, with seven students from past classes submitting survey comments.

4 Women's Studies is not a mandatory class at Vista View High, and not all Grade 11 and 12 girls choose to take it. The school has a population of approximately 250 students in Grades 9-12, and typically fewer than half of the Grade 11 and 12 girls take Women's Studies.

These survey comments are only supplemental to the interview data, and cannot speak to the full experience of previous Women's Studies classes. Surveys are not ideal for gaining rich description, but were a convenient way to gain additional, more longitudinal data.

In addition to students, I spoke informally with several Vista View teachers and staff, and formally interviewed two Women's Studies guest speakers and course instructor Mrs. Brown about the class. These interviews were fairly open and flexible to allow these participants to express what they thought was most important about their experiences in the class. I had a few questions jotted down in case I needed to jog their memories or get them talking, but mostly let the participants lead the way. Interview flexibility aligned with feminist anti-oppressive research praxis in that it offered these women an opportunity to speak and speak freely.

To supplement my study at Vista View, I also engaged a participant, Shauna, who had attended an all-girls feminist junior high school with a Girl Empowerment curriculum. This interview tells about benefits of the program, and provides a point of comparison to the Women's Studies course at Vista View High. It is important to note that Shauna has self-identified as having a learning disability.

In all, I collected formal interview and survey information from 25 people; 18 of whom I spoke with at least once, and 7 of whom I interacted with online. All but four of these participants took the Vista View High Women's Studies class. The seven survey respondents had graduated sometime in the last 10 years. Fourteen participants were students in the year studied. Of the four non-class participants, three were adults involved with Vista View Women's Studies, and one was a student from a different school.

Inclusivity

When I embarked on the study, I had naïve hopes for a racially diverse population of participants coming from a variety of backgrounds. This was before I discovered that Gender Studies/Women's Studies classes in Canadian high schools are very rare, and before I learned that such courses are offered only because one passionate teacher took it upon herself to develop something to teach her students. These two factors meant that my study location was essentially predetermined, and consequently, a diverse population was unattainable. Visible minorities at Vista View High are just that – very visible because they are few and far between. The town in which the study was conducted is predominantly white; however, there is a First Nations presence in Vista View and a small number of other non-white individuals.⁵

Only two of my interview participants and one survey respondent identified as something other than Caucasian. The interviewees were asked to speak about their personal experience as a racialized person in a predominantly white school and town. Given the brevity of their research narratives and the fact that they formed such a small minority of participants, their related experiences cannot be generalized to a larger population. Rather, they will enable us to understand the factors impacting those particular individuals and their reception of the course.

I was informed that there are no students in the school with physical disabilities, and the Women's Studies curriculum did not address issues of disability. This will be noted and problematized later in the thesis; at this point, suffice it to say that I was unable to speak with any girls who identify as visibly disabled. I did, however, speak with a

⁵ Statistical data could not be found.

student with a learning disability – Shauna, whose story is told in Appendix G, is the student who did not attend Vista View High. Rather, she was exposed to another form of Gender Studies in her all-girls school. While this participant is not a student of Vista View, and is therefore somewhat out of place in the context of this study, Shauna is an important and interesting participant in that she provides a point of comparison to Vista View High's Women's Studies program.

Thoughtfulness in Data Analysis Process

While re-reading transcripts, I gradually organized interview data into topics, themes, and subthemes by using a simple table. I had a general idea of topics I hoped to hear the girls speak about (for example, sexism in high school, empowerment, teacher impact) which served as a starting point from which to extrapolate participant stories and comments. Nonetheless, I employed a thoughtful approach to analyzing the data by carefully reading each transcript multiple times and allowing the chart to evolve as I analyzed each interview. Relevant new topics would emerge that I had not anticipated. This type of analysis allowed me to become very familiar with each participant interview and to honour participants by ensuring their words shaped the final result (rather than pulling out what I wanted for my results and ignoring the rest). Allowing girls' comments to shape the thesis is consistent with feminist anti-oppressive research praxis, as described earlier, since it places some of the power in participant hands and keeps the text genuine to their lived experiences.

Once I had a loosely organized 100+ page chart of various quotes, I began to pore through different sections of quotes, finding better ways to relate the themes, joining

different themes, separating some into more precise categories, and coming up with new themes entirely. A laborious process, this could be nothing but deeply personal. I was particularly struck by some themes, especially those that seemed to speak to girls learning to stand up for themselves, accepting themselves, and being targeted for their sex. I also noticed that my interviews had tended to ask for negatives regarding school atmosphere. The presence of these negative environmental factors are talked about in my discussion of the setting in Chapter Four, where I problematize my tendency to focus on the negative.

Feminist Ethics

This research project is ethically complex, largely due to the fact that I was interviewing adolescents. Working with young people brings greater possibilities of coercion and situations of power-over than researching adults. In this section, I discuss several issues in light of my research project. As a feminist scholar, ethical awareness is not a new concept for me; however, the nature of ethics – the varying shades of gray involved – prevented me from coming to any final conclusion about what was and is the most ethical way to conduct my research. This research position meshes with a feminist critique of positivism (Haraway, 1991), and avoids making assumptions regarding whose knowledge is right or wrong.

In any study, there are a variety of ethical dilemmas to consider and several angles from which to look at each of those dilemmas. Some basic ethical concerns in my study include the need to lower the possibility of coercion, as well as the emergence of more complex issues such as voice and representation. As I discuss these, it is obvious that some ethical questions cannot be fully answered, partly because there is not always a

single good answer but rather several conflicting points to consider; and partly because when one is in the field, where the truly significant ethical moments will arise, the right decision (if there is one) might not readily be made. Thus, rather than the cut and dried document appraised by the Human Subject Ethics Committee, this chapter does not profess to have any concrete answers and rather encourages further thought. I am sure I will continue to dwell upon the ethical implications of this study long after the final thesis has been defended; such continued reflexivity keeps a feminist academic concerned for the welfare of past, current, and future study participants and is essential for continued anti-oppressive research.

Confidentiality

In a study such as this, maintaining anonymity is key. In order to protect participants, their identities could not be made public. This was particularly important because most participants were under age. Thus, pseudonyms were assigned to all participants, and their decision whether or not to participate was kept confidential. Further, considering the small size of the town and the school, it was imperative that the identity of both be protected. Coming from such a small town, participants might easily be identified through their stories. Therefore, the pseudonym Vista View was assigned to the town and Vista View High to the school. To further avoid compromising anonymity and allowing the potential discovery of the actual school name, I have kept from quoting the extant curriculum extensively.

Coercion of Younger Participants

A strong ethical concern arose in that I was dealing with students under the age of

majority. Obviously, parental consent was a must for these interviews. However, wanting to mitigate the researcher/researched power relations at the outset, I felt the students themselves also deserved the right to decline to participate. Therefore, I administered two consent forms – first to parents, and second, to the participants themselves. Part of my research is based on my suspicion that adolescent girls are underestimated in their mental and emotional ability. Therefore, it was in keeping with my research vision to value their personal informed consent.

My conviction that adolescent girls have such strong capability also gives me pause. I tend to think they are smart and able to make important decisions themselves – such as whether or not to answer a particular question. However, I could be wrong in this assumption and the possibility for coercion was great. Before embarking on this research, I was warned more than once by colleagues, as well as experienced adolescent researchers (Pascoe, 2007; Bettie, 2003), that many teen-aged girls have a knack for knowing exactly what to say to please others, and I was vigilantly reminding myself of this as I gathered their stories. However, I rarely noticed girls trying to impress me. Even so, I needed to be ultra-conscious of my effect – as a young professional woman entering the high school domain – on each participant. The girls consistently demonstrated their independence and ability to articulate what they felt was important. When I flubbed by asking a leading question, the interviewee would more often than not politely correct my wrong assumption and clarify what they thought about the situation:

Auburn: So you guys were both feminist, or had some strong female influence before the class. Did it affect the way you think about the world, even though you had that background, did it strengthen your feminist core or anything like that?

Maria: To a degree.

Tanya: Well I was feminist before, so it's not so much changed that.

However, it is likely there were times when I failed to notice I had made an assumption, and the girls did not correct me.

Respect for Participants: Not Just a Number

With Fine's (1992) suggestion of maintaining strong respect for participants in mind, I chose to interview fewer girls so as to allow thoughtful consideration for each of their stories. I wanted to share a significant amount of time with each participant. I felt each girl deserved the opportunity to tell her story to her satisfaction, touching on things that she considered important, rather than answering specific questions in a confined way. In this way, I endeavored to let the participants bring my attention to issues that were not readily apparent to me. A small sample of in-depth interviews provides a rich data set which has the potential to bring new issues to light: issues that matter to the participants themselves. Further, rather than being a number on a sheet (which is inconsistent with feminist research practice), participants are honoured as important.

Representation and Speaking for Others

Wilkinson and Kitzinger (1996) ask if it is ever acceptable to speak for others. While I may share gender with the young women in my study, this is hardly justification to speak as though I am an expert on their situation. After all, I am no longer under the age of majority and my university education distances me from my participants. Moreover, I endeavored to speak to participants from a variety of backgrounds. My middle-class status, my 'whiteness,' and a number of other factors further distanced me from some of my participants. Does my interaction with the girls for a few hours give me

the right to speak on their behalf, in spite of all that separates us?

Alcoff (1995) indicates that there are consequences to *not* speaking for others, since “a retreat from speaking for will not result in an increase in receptive listening in all cases” (p. 20). Had I determined that I should not speak on behalf of these young women, it is hardly likely that the space I intended to fill with their words would be left open for them to jump in and represent themselves. Rather, this space would likely be hijacked by voices that are used to being heard. This lack of space for adolescent girls' voices, particularly within academia, is both motivation and justification for my research project.

As a young academic who has struggled to be heard within the male-dominated university institution, I feel I can identify with girls struggling to get through high school. While the interview excerpt above shows me admitting to girls that I am an “old woman” to them, I am still young in the relative scheme of things, and, recently turned 25, I clearly remember feeling angry when people did not take me seriously because I was a teen-aged girl. Now, I feel angry when people do not take me seriously because I am a young woman. In this way, I have some commonality with the girls, and can speak to their experiences with considerable compassion.

However, what distances me from the girls – particularly my post-secondary education – also facilitates my speaking with and for them. Through an undergraduate degree in Women's Studies and the better part of a masters degree focusing on adolescent girls, I have come to know many of the forces that shape girls' lives. Though I am not currently experiencing life as an adolescent girl, I have a different advantage; I can name, theorize, and understand what the girls tell me on an academic level. I can perhaps take

their concerns further than the principal's office – a place, Tanya and Maria told me, where they were refused help when they asked for it.

In this paper, I also speak on behalf of the course teacher – a woman who, on a professional level, was limited in what she could safely express. While Mrs. Brown was a gutsy lady who fought for what she believed in, she also said to me, “I don't want to lose my job.” Very aware of the implications too *much* resistance might have, she was doing the best she could in a tricky situation. While I am not a teacher, Mrs. Brown and I have something in common – a desire for the advancement of high school Women's Studies. Her enthusiasm throughout this project makes me confident that I can speak on her behalf in bringing about some increased understanding of the benefits of Women's Studies to girls. I can do this for Mrs. Brown, without jeopardizing her job.

Guest speakers offered their stories to me without my solicitation. I use their words to describe the class and get a small understanding of what the class provides to its guest speakers. The eagerness to share their stories leads me to believe that, more than anything, I was providing them with a space to express their support for a course they considered essential in the high school. Again, I provide an avenue for these women's stories to be told and heard. Though I justify my speaking with and for these participants, I am very aware that I have taken a huge responsibility upon myself, and I do not fool myself by believing I am an expert on expressing these stories. Rather, I can only hope that I do these inspirational girls and women justice in my telling of their stories.

Feminist Reflexivity

Doucet and Mauthner (2002) argue that researchers should “be as transparent, as is

reasonably possible, about the epistemological, ontological, theoretical, and personal assumptions that inform our research generally, and our analytic and interpretative processes specifically” (p. 3). They argue it is via such reflexivity that high ethical standards are met. During the stage that researchers find their voice in their writing, “the researcher understands a phenomenon *and* finds a way of communicating that understanding” (Reinharz, 1992, p. 16). Oftentimes, this research is related in a personal manner through the use of “I” as my findings and what they mean are relayed.

While I agree that reflexivity is essential to ethical feminist research, it has limitations and thus is not the catch-all perfect answer for this project (Fine, 1992). Complete confidence in the ethical potential of reflexivity would be problematic for two reasons. First, I am not capable of being fully reflexive about the project since I am sure to have blind spots in my own understanding of my relation to the project. Further, no matter how reflexive I am, I am never totally certain what is the most ethical approach. So, while I endeavour to accurately represent myself and my struggles during the research process, I cannot expect to touch on every issue of importance. I undoubtedly take some things for granted, focus too much on others, and feel sheepish about a seemingly narcissistic representation of myself in the research. These factors limit the success of my reflexivity.

Aside from the limitations of reflexivity, there is also the sheer complexity of reflexivity. It is challenging to incorporate author presence into the project findings, and I tend to place greater emphasis on the words of participants than on my own struggles, since I think participant stories are the gold of any research project. Nevertheless, I try to

acknowledge my assumptions to be fair and transparent to readers and participants.

Possible Wider Research Effects

My research is intended to advance the development of effective and enjoyable courses designed to help young women prepare for a full and rewarding life. Despite my best intentions, and no matter what careful steps I take in presenting my findings, I cannot predict how the work will be read. Though my meaning will be the “communicative intent” (Giddens, 1987, p. 106) of my thesis, the author of a work can be considered no longer relevant once a reader arrives, since ultimately the reader gives his or her own meaning to the words read. While I accurately represent the issues at hand, I have little control over how the work is received after it is printed. It has the potential to affect more people than the original research participants – readers, the community interested in this topic, and, possibly, the wider population as well. Further, I, as a researcher, will be impacted by the whole process. This is an oft neglected ethical issue, but it is important to bear in mind not only how my role as a researcher affects participants, but also how it affects myself. Feminist research is not calculated and cold; rather, emotions and connections develop and necessarily influence the collection of data. Other feminist writers have also discussed this dilemma (Bettie, 2003).

Learning From Others' Ethical Experiences

In *Dude, You're a Fag*, Pascoe (2007) discusses her ethical dilemmas as a young woman entering a high school world for 18 months to study masculinity and sexuality. Pascoe details moments in her research that Guillemin and Gillam (2004) would consider ethically important moments – “the difficult, often subtle, and usually unpredictable

situations that arise in the practice of doing research” (p. 262). Reading about Pascoe's struggles researching in a high school setting helped me to conceptualize some of the challenges I might face during my research before I entered the field. This helped me realize what a volatile and unpredictable location high schools really are. While I remember clearly my struggles in junior high, I was homeschooled through high school and was a bit unprepared for the charged atmosphere present. On the other hand, this lack of previous experience sometimes helped me to differentiate myself from students, something with which Pascoe struggled.

In fact, connecting too much with students was another difficulty Pascoe (2007) faced when she spent time with girls who experimented with masculinity. She found herself identifying with politically active girls in the Gay-Straight Alliance club. As a lesbian herself, Pascoe empathized strongly with the girls as they shared stories of their struggles with homophobic students and administrators. Pascoe was not sure how to deal with these moments where she wanted to voice support for the girls but hesitated to do so since it would position her differently as a researcher in the wider school context.

There were several politically-charged moments where I wanted to support or disagree with some action or statement made by participants and their school peers. I have read (Rapley, 2004; Oakley, 1990) that, for the sake of honesty and respect for participants, I should be entirely transparent during the research process. During fieldwork, inter-subjectivity that incorporates my own “intuition, feelings and viewpoint as a part of the research relationship and process” has been recommended (Wolf, 1996, p. 5). On the other hand, I have been advised that I should be relatively enigmatic about my

position since knowledge of my stance could easily change the ways in which participants respond to my questions, and that “volunteering information about oneself can often be the opposite of reciprocity,” instead burdening interviewees (Wolf, 1996, p. 20). After reading several books and articles (Bettie, 2003; Pascoe, 2007, Pomerantz, 2008, others) about other research done with young people, it seemed the best recommended strategy was, beyond acknowledging my appreciation for their course, to present myself as neutrally as possible. However, I found myself making in-the-moment decisions during interviews if girls seemed to need affirmation of their personal worth or political stance. I also found myself wanting to broaden girls' minds when they made sweeping declarations and had to resist – sometimes unsuccessfully – assuming a teacher role myself. For example, in the following interview excerpt, I wanted very much to help my participant see the other side of the story when it comes to legal changes surrounding prostitution:

Tanya: [The laws are being changed so] that if a woman is willing to sell herself then she should be allowed to. And this is what my social teacher is saying right now too, and I'm really butting heads with her over it, 'cause I was like, this is not okay, drug test these women, see if they're clean, 'cause if they are, then maybe it's a different story, or maybe they're doing it for their kids, or maybe they're doing it 'cause they need food the next day.... because no woman should ever feel that she is ever that low or that in need that she has to sell her own body. And they made it legal! I like, lost so much faith in Canada.

Auburn: That's interesting. Although yeah, just the legalities of it and not that it's good, but at least they're not being criminalized, because instead of them getting help, they're just being called criminals.

Tanya: But it's gotten to the point where they're just putting them in jail which is a better place for them anyways.

Auburn: Yeah, that's a good point.

In actuality, I did not think it was a good point. I thought the participant had a very narrow understanding of both our jail system and the rights of sex workers. The vast body of literature and research surrounding sex workers rights – not something I am

particularly well versed in myself – seemed lost on her, and my gut reaction was to try to bring up some of the complexity of the situation. I immediately felt that inserting my politics into the middle of her story was a mistake and backpedaled, feeling like a fool. However, qualitative methodological expert Rapley (2004) argues that interview-talk is “the joint production of *accounts* or *versions*” and is “locally and collaboratively produced” (p. 16, his emphasis). He argues that neutrality in an interviewer is mythological and “interviewer neutrality has the fundamental effect of 'silencing', and in some cases totally banishing, the very active, collaborative work of the interviewer in producing the talk as it is” (p. 21).

Rapley's point is well taken, since there is no way I could be completely neutral: Girls would undoubtedly hear my excitement when they told stories of how they learned to stand up for themselves, or see my disgust when they told me about a particularly sexist comment a male teacher had made in class. However, for me to engage in a political disagreement in the middle of an interview with a 17 year old seemed to be crossing some sort of research line, and I still believe backtracking was the right thing to do in that moment.

Participant Safety and Reporting At-Risk Youth

It was paramount that I be prepared for ethically important moments that involved the safety of participants and their peers. In some ways, it was convenient that I was dealing with minors because there is little gray area if they indicated they or others were at risk – there is an obligation to report this to the principal to facilitate the participant's dealing with such situations. My ethics application stated that evidence of risky behaviour

included any comment indicating the participant or others were at risk of physical harm or were engaging in criminal activity. However, I did not fully agree that all criminal behaviour constituted reason for me to report a participant. For example, when, in passing, a participant indicated they had a few beers at a party on the weekend, I personally did not think this needed to go beyond the interview. Adolescent drinking is considered by many to be normal behaviour, and to betray confidentiality over something largely thought of as a normal occurrence was, I thought, uncalled for. Unless the students were to indicate their drinking was out of hand, it seemed I did not have sufficient reason to break my oath of confidentiality as well as their trust. Aside from small incidences of drinking, participants did not indicate they were at risk, and it was never necessary to report risky behaviour to the principal. However, it was imperative that I was prepared for such a situation.

When is Research Important?

How do we, as researchers, define 'important research'? How do we determine if our work is socially responsible? Some argue that emancipatory research, or research that brings about empowerment, is ethically sound (Barnes, 2003). My intentions are that my research be emancipatory for the young women who participate in the study, as well as Western Canadian adolescent girls of the future.

First, participants were given the chance to speak and be heard by an attentive, empathetic listener. Their words were taken seriously and contributed to an academic work. In essence, their voices were heard (and perhaps will continue to be heard) on some level. Second, this research project has the potential to provide important information in

the development and offering of Women's Studies courses to more adolescents – something the participants considered essential.

Once again, while this all sounds very good on paper, I recognized that my intentions and hopes for the research could have been misinformed from the start. Perhaps girls did not find the Women's Studies course to be helpful, and my presence would only highlight the failure of the course to improve their lives. Even more disheartening would be if the students had not cared about the course. Finally, there was the possibility that some of my participants' comments could be insulting or derogatory to others. This is a potentially oppressive situation within intended emancipatory research. Thus, because of the nature of the research, emancipation could not be guaranteed in my project.

Thinking about Methods

The further thought and questioning mentioned above may be the main outcome of my research. While I had a solid research plan, and have future goals and aspirations for this project, ultimately I am producing new knowledge about girls and Women's Studies courses in high school. As Foucault (2003) argues, inquiry, critique and theory do not need to be – indeed, cannot be – clearly defined, absolute, and final, but can only push the boundaries of thought and understanding. While I can emerge from the research with some recommendations about what makes a Women's Studies class successful, each group of students will be different, times will change, and the real life played out in classrooms will be ever-fluid. Similarly, as discussed throughout this chapter, the research process itself is fluid.

To contextualize the environmental factors affecting the girls, I next describe the

school, along with the structures and forces present within it. An in-depth understanding of the school atmosphere provides a background to why the Women's Studies class exists, and how it fits in the Vista View Curriculum.

Chapter Four: Establishing a Context

The Study Setting

This chapter describes the setting in which the research took place, and provides some context for the girls' stories. Here, I present the school, and the town, where girls came together to learn about women's issues. In such a close study as this, findings cannot be presented without establishing a clear context.

The community to which I have given the pseudonym Vista View is a small town with a population of about 4000, literally in the middle of nowhere: four and a half hours from any major city and over an hour from the next small town. Situated in a beautiful location, it attracts tourists brave enough to venture out on often icy roads with dozens of signs warning motorists that wildlife are always at large. The surrounding area services mining and oil industries. Between the tourists, riggers, and miners, the town lacks the familiarity of many small towns, because there are always unfamiliar faces in town. One of the class guest speakers described Vista View to me:

Marsha: It's a very different community than any other community I've lived in before ... [Mothers working] shift work, transient, lots and lots of money, because people make lots of money here in the oil patch and the mining and things like that, without educations.

Young participants were generally ambivalent about their town, with some expressing stronger distaste. Most wanted to move away as soon as they could manage after graduating, although a couple mentioned a hesitancy to leave their families behind. Tanya felt particularly wronged by her town, to the point where she debated how often she might see her parents in the future if they stayed at Vista View:

I don't have enough confidence in this town, or in this community to raise my

kids here. As much as I want my mom and my dad to be a part of my family's life and everything, I don't even know, like it's gotten to the point where I don't know if I'll bring my kids here to visit, 'cause I don't want to submit them to [what I had to deal with].

While Tanya was vehement in describing the downfalls of Vista View, others had a rather naïve view of their town, considering serious problems to be away from home, perhaps for comfort's sake. Asked if domestic violence might happen in Vista View, Moira responded “Not in this town, but in other towns [nods].” Most students I talked to thought it was a decent (if “boring”) town, but were feeling ready – as grade 12 graduation approached – to spread their wings and try living on their own, somewhere else. They were ready to escape the confines of small town life, both for its lack of opportunities and for its lack of anonymity: Women's Studies teacher Mrs. Brown remarked, “The girls talk about that, small town atmosphere ... and what do people say behind your back?” Some planned to leave for university in the fall, and several planned to work for a year or so, until they could afford to move away and/or pursue further education.

Adult participants speculated that Women's Studies class had some effect on the wider community. To some extent, the course reached farther than the walls of the classroom. Rather, with time, the principles learned in class spread from the students to their friends and parents; even grandparents heard from their granddaughters regarding women's rights. Guest speakers did not necessarily know exactly what Women's Studies was about when they agreed to speak with the girls, but came to hold great respect for the course after they had attended once or twice. Further, other teachers would get “an earful” from Mrs. Brown, and began to grasp the importance of the course to their students when the girls emerged from class understanding themselves and the world they lived in just a

little better. As Mrs. Brown remarked,

I think a lot of the times I'm gradually – I'm not just teaching the girls, I'm actually teaching the whole community. Like, it filters through. And my colleagues, I think some of them really resisted it at first, and then they started going “Oh.”

Guest speaker Marsha also emphasized this, “You do hear things in the community and stuff [about Women's Studies], so it is kind of spreading out there.”

The school itself is typical of a small town: Working with a limited budget, the only high school in town struggles to meet the needs of approximately 250 diverse students. The transient nature of the town means that some students attend for short periods of time; however, the majority of the girls I talked with had been there for several years, if not their whole lives. Students I interviewed mentioned most often that their school had limited options, and that they wished there were more interesting extra-curricular activities. Overall, however, they indicated that the school and teachers were “all right”; Janelle stated that “It's okay. It doesn't offer great things but it's pretty good I guess.” Only two suggested that the school was substandard, both in cleanliness and in the quality of course offerings. Most seemed to think these aspects were pretty normal – the best that could be offered in a small town like theirs. Girls also mentioned that the small school population inhibited solitude; so few students meant that they had little choice but to interact with everyone:

Bree-Ann: It is a small school, so you *have* to talk to people [including bullies], pretty much.

Angela: And you see everybody every day, right, it's not like you can avoid them either. They're there, in every class.

Most students did not begrudge the school its small size or lack of funds.

Many participants expressed displeasure at the hostile atmosphere that was sometimes present in school. As in any school, students tended to be divided based on academic categories – most notably by grade. For example, Traci highlighted a lack of familiarity with students in other grades in saying, “I have no idea [about that boy] 'cause he's not the same age as me.” There was more than just a lack of familiarity across age groups; in fact, bullying was enabled by the age differences:

Becky: I remember when I was coming into grade 9 and this grade 11 guy was going into grade 12 and he said, “When you come into this school I'm going to push you down the stairs.” I remember that and I was so scared to come into high school. I was so scared.

Thus, while students were distanced by age and grade difference, this difference also allowed for oppression and bullying of younger students by older ones.

Students were also divided into groups based on whether they were in the academic stream (post-secondary preparatory) or in the non-academic stream (trades preparatory). Unlike age, this division was not necessarily a basis for bullying; in fact, the reverse was true. Familiarity brought on by being in the same program enabled hostilities to grow, whereas the lack of more than casual acquaintance between students in different streams prevented antagonisms from flaring as strongly.

In the next section, I explore the antagonisms present in the school and consider the environment produced by those hostilities. While this may cast Vista View High in a poor light, the school is not atypical in the socio-cultural context of North American public schools (Bettie, 2003; Meyer, 2009; Pascoe, 2007; Pomerantz, 2008) – in fact, schools *without* this sort of environment are particularly rare, if they exist at all. I do not wish to vilify Vista View High; rather, I hope to provide the context for where the girls

live out their day-to-day lives, and in which they took on the themes taught in Women's Studies.

Hostile Hallways

The atmosphere at Vista View High includes prejudices, bullying, and gender-based bullying. I note a bias in this chapter – my interview questions tended to focus on negative social forces in the school, and it was not until I reached the analysis stage that I realized I had, for the most part, neglected to ask girls about positive social endeavours made by the school and its students. While I think it is important to note ways in which the school presented an unhealthy learning atmosphere, I regret that the other side of the coin was left out of my conversations with the girls.

I did ask what they thought about their school, and throughout the interviews frequently allowed (in fact, encouraged) the girls to go off on tangents. These conversations rarely went in a school-praising direction, and the Grade 12 students generally seemed about ready to get out of high school and on to the next stage in their lives. I give some space, later in this chapter, to the positive aspects and school spirit present in Vista View High School; albeit with limited data.

Prejudices Based on Differences

Prejudices were, predictably, present at Vista View High. Perhaps the harshest judgments were based on sexuality, race, and disability. All students face some sort of ageism, but this was less prominent in school, where they were surrounded by their peers, than it was outside of school. Classism also played a more subtle role in students' lives.

Homophobia, particularly against gay boys, is strong at Vista View High. I was

speaking with Maria and Tanya, two of the less popular girls who found themselves at odds with administration, teachers, and students at one time or another. We were discussing homosexuality when the following conversation came up:

Auburn: Is this school welcoming –

Maria: Ha! Nope!

Tanya: Nooo! There was a guy –

Maria: It doesn't welcome anybody!

Tanya: There was a guy who came out in this school and he was ostracized and alienated for it, and he ended up breaking up with his boyfriend, that he's dating a girl in the school now. And I feel so bad for him, and this girl was his friend, so I know, personally, it's a cover up. But that breaks my heart, that just because of his sexuality, the school was that bad for him, that he had to hide it.

With a population of about 250 students, the rarity of an obvious homosexual presence at Vista View High was remarkable (although understandable considering the hostilities faced by gays and lesbians in this community); most students said there was “maybe one” when I asked if there were any gay students at the school. None of the Women's Studies students I talked to identified as anything other than straight, nor did any express personal homophobia. In fact, this was one prejudice that they all recognized as particularly damaging in their school: Several white students did not think racism was a problem, and most participants did not consider ableism to factor in student lives, but all interviewees noticed that homophobia was rampant in their school.

As mentioned, racism tended to be somewhat invisible to white students. In the following excerpt, Wanda, a white girl and a close friend of Jodi, who is a visible minority, explains to another white friend, Becky, that racism may indeed affect non-white students at the school:

Auburn: ... if you wanted to say anything about racism in this school?

Becky: I don't think there's that much.

Jodi: [laughs scoffingly]

Becky: I don't know!

Wanda: Well, from our point of view. Not from her [Jodi's] point of view.

During a previous focus group involving only Wanda and Jodi, Jodi spoke of how strongly her race made her feel othered:

Jodi: And I come to this school, and next thing I know I'm walking down the middle of the hallway. I mean, I'm like, okay, okay I notice the difference.

Wanda: Everyone's looking at you!

Jodi: Yeah 'cause I'm like the only black kid in the whole town, and everyone's looking at me, and I'm like, "Okay!" Yeah, I'm different.

While Jodi does not describe blatant racist comments here, she hints at something perhaps more sinister – the subtle “othering” of non-Caucasian students.

While racist rhetoric was generally unacceptable among students, less obvious forms of racism were more common. In fact, some participants expressed racism during interviews. In Canada, subtle judgment of First Nations peoples is often considered more acceptable than racism against other groups, and is often excused among Caucasian people (Lund, 2006). Traci – perhaps the golden girl of Women's Studies, one who truly understood complex feminist concepts, took women's issues very seriously, and was identified by Mrs. Brown as the smartest student in her entire grade – spoke about her difficulty in taking Natives seriously because many fit the stereotypes so prevalent in her town. She also expressed that the only time she felt boredom during Women's Studies was when the class was learning about issues faced by First Nations women. Thus, a student reputed to be the brightest girl in the class failed to recognize her own oppressive tendencies and the privilege she herself exhibited. This is typical of those enjoying white privilege (McIntosh, 1988). It is likely that she felt comfortable expressing these racist views to me because I am also Caucasian – supposedly we shared an insider status of

understanding the difficulties “they” (Native people) caused. Kingfisher (2007) has noted similar tendencies among whites of subtle, understood racism towards Indigenous people.

Interestingly, Carly, a First Nations girl, told me about the lack of racism she experienced, noting that while she knew racist people were at her school, “I don't talk to them and they don't talk to me or point out anything about my race or anyone else's race.” Carly indicated that she had a strong group of friends who would stick up for her should any situation arise. However, she also told the following story about a friend:

I was like “[John], you have to calm down” 'cause he was gettin' all mad. And then started callin' me a squaw and he was like, “You're brown!” and it didn't bug me that much because he was really drunk, but we're not friends right now because I don't let that kind of stuff, I don't let people do that to me and stuff like that. It's rude.

It interested me that Carly related this story as if blatant racism from a friend was only simple rudeness. Perhaps her attitude linked with the attitude of Traci – that racism against First Nations people was less remarkable and less alarming than racism against other raced groups. That Carly accepted her friend's comments without much indignation could be a sign that internalized oppression, where an oppressed group comes to use against itself the methods of the oppressor (Bartky, 1992), is impacting Carly.

Another area that seemed to fly under the radar of participants was discrimination based on ability. Like gay students, physically disabled students were almost non-existent at Vista View High. The school was not fully accessible – in fact, one teacher had broken his leg the weekend before I arrived, and it was quite a spectacle to watch him slowly making his way up the stairs, leaning heavily against the rail and laboriously pulling his broken leg up each step while a helpful student carried his crutches and others teased him good-naturedly for his temporary handicap. It was not that anti-disabled sentiment was

present – rather, physical disability was not really present as an issue at Vista View High.

Learning disabilities and mental health problems, on the other hand, were present and could be a source of humiliation:

Becky: It's less now, our grade doesn't make fun of him [a boy with Aspergers Syndrome], but the younger grades, like grade nine boys, always pick on him 'cause they're in the same grade. But I feel bad for him.

Students were not the only ones reacting to difference in abilities – teachers also had to navigate the different needs of all students. Mrs. Brown commented on marking the work of a student with severe dyslexia:

Her writing skills, it was torture for her. Like she did it, she got the main idea and I think she grasped what we were talking about, so I'd give her the marks, right? ... But assessing her, that's always a little tough. You want to be equitable and fair, but then you've got to take all these other factors into consideration.

The physical structure of the school, the expectations regarding completion and grading of assignments, and every day ideas of how people should look, act, and think, mean that it is very challenging to create a high school environment that welcomes all students and their personal requirements to accomplish learning goals; this is perhaps true of every public high school in Canada.

Perhaps the most elusive prejudice present in Vista View High was that of class. An issue that has all but disappeared from common discourse, class nevertheless remains an important factor in young people's lives. Living in a supposed meritocracy, class position is commonly considered to be a direct result of a person's worth – impoverished because the individual is lacking, not because our society does not truly provide equal opportunity to all. Feminist scholar Bettie (2003) has noted that class continues to be a relevant form of oppression, particular among girls who also deal with intersecting forms

of oppression. Nevertheless, common discourse tends to deny the relevancy of class position on girls' success. The lack of recognition of class privilege could be seen in Vista View; of all students interviewed, only Wanda recognized the impact class might have, and this recognition was largely due to witnessing blatant class-based bullying:

Wanda: She got bullied a lot.

Becky: For being poor?

Wanda: Well I remember this one girl in our grade, ... she came up to her and was like, what did she say, she said something about how she was homeless and blah blah, she was just really mean. I was like, “[Monica], shut up!”

Becky: [Monica] said that?!

Wanda: Yeah. Kids do get picked on if they look p–

Becky: Different, I think if they look different.

Other than this one instance, participants considered poverty to be a non-issue. Even in this example, Becky was alarmed at the idea of class-based bullying, and interrupted Wanda to substitute “different” for Wanda's possible use of the word “poor”.

The lack of attention to class-based bullying could be an oversight on the part of interviewees. However, it could also be due to the fact that the small town has quite a few resources, and even students coming from uneducated families have access to money through the oil and coal industries. Further, poverty is most prevalent among First Nations peoples – which may make the class position invisible because of its tie to race. I think the lack of recognition of poverty as a truly limiting factor in some student's lives is likely due in part to a combination of all three of these forces.

The final prejudice students faced is ageism – discrimination based on youth. Each girl responded positively when I asked “do you ever feel like people don't respect you because you're young?”:

Wanda: [Teachers say] “You don't understand.”... It makes me feel like I don't know nothing. It's like, okay, I have to get my parents involved when I

didn't want to in the first place. It's like I can't fight my own battles, so I have to get my Mom. I don't feel like I'm respected in that way, like, I don't know. It just makes me feel like I'm a little kid and I always need my parents there. Jodi: It makes me feel like I'm no one. Like, no one acknowledges me. Every time, it's like, "No no, you're young, you don't know about this." Or – yeah. It pisses me off. When people talk like that!

Traci: Yeah. A lot in this school ... And sometimes people don't take you seriously ... It makes you feel little.

Angela: I know that I have opinions too, but it's like my opinions don't matter sometimes, and that kind of makes me mad, because I'm opinionated.

Bree-Anne: Yeah, pretty much the same. Or like, we're not too much younger, we are graduating and stuff, so it's kind of like annoying, 'cause I am going to be out in the real world next year, so I should be able to say what I want. But yeah, it's annoying.

These quotes demonstrate that girls are not just feeling disrespected, but are made to think of themselves as uninformed, gullible, and “little.” They may be young and have much to learn, but discounting the opinions and knowledge they have developed serves to senselessly lower their self-esteem (Sadowski, 2008). The literature shows that young people around the world accomplish amazing things (Plan Canada, 2011; Skelton & Valentine, 1998; others), and for teachers and other adults to discount their opinions and words based on their youth is a grievous mistake (Sadowski, 2008).

Students faced ageism from other students as well; the school was divided depending on grade. Grade 9 students, in particular, were the target of humiliation by older students:

Traci: Everyone doesn't like the grade 9s, essentially, in our school, 'cause they're new. Everyone goes through it though, so it's a stupid reason to be hating them. Like they don't know which side to walk on in the hallway, like they just get in the way, right? They get better as it goes on. By the end of the year they're relatively normal. But at the beginning, they're like standing in the hallway, the first day of school they're like scared, looking around “I don't know what to do!”

The youngest and (usually) weakest children in school, grade nine students proved to be an easy target for the older adolescents.

Intersectionality

The various prejudices present at Vista View High combined to produce complex discursive contexts surrounding difference. All girls faced the joint effects of ageism and sexism; they were patronized not only for being young, but for being young *women*. While youth in general are thought of as irresponsible and perhaps a little rebellious (Valentine et al, 1998), the literature shows that girls in particular face judgment for their youth combined with their sex (Sadowski, 2008; Galley, 2008). Likewise, while adult women may deal with sexism regularly, they do not face the extra age-related dimension of oppression that girls do (McNamee, 1998).

The intersection of oppressions does not mean a simple doubling (or tripling, quadrupling, etc) of oppressive forces; rather, it results in a complex melding of social judgments (Jiwani, 2006). Certain aspects of people's lives are more greatly emphasized due to their multiple differences. For example, when Carly's friend called her a squaw (above), he used a term that highlighted her supposed dual "shortcomings" by drawing on discourses of both gender and racial oppression (squaw as a both gendered and racial slur). On the other hand, some dimensions of oppression are made invisible because of a person's "other otherness(es)." For example, Jiwani (2006) argues that in the sensationalized murder of British Columbian teen Reena Virk, media painted the story as horrific because it was an example of girl-on-girl violence, and alleviated white responsibility by minimizing the role of racial oppression in the attackers' actions.

All participants faced dual oppressions in the form of ageism and sexism. However, other factors, such as race and physical ability, impacted some students. Understanding how these forces impact them is not a simple process; in some instances, oppressions are unacknowledged or made invisible. In others, multiple differences are combined to highlight a particular person's high level of so-called deficiency (Jiwani, 2006).

Student Bullying

Bullying is certainly a problem at Vista View High. While girls reported that physical abuse happened relatively rarely, it seemed that verbal abuse was rampant; Traci noted that, “We don't have a lot of tolerance for people beating the crap out of each other. Lots of verbal abuse.” Much of the verbal abuse centred on body image, with many girls being targeted for weight – regardless of their actual body type. While Tanya expostulated indignantly “I get called fat in this school often. And I'm not! I don't even weigh a hundred pounds!,” Wanda noted that though she may indeed be overweight, the bullying was not important: “Yeah, about my weight, people have said 'Oh, you're a dinosaur' or whatever, and this, I'm like, 'You know what, fuck off. I don't give a shit.’” Girls were not only targeted for their weight, but also other aspects of their appearance: Spending too much time on their hair, spending too little time on their hair, wearing the “wrong” clothes – basically anything could become a reason to bully a girl about her appearance.

Angela told me,

And there was this one guy, I remember, he was like, he said to [Jen], “You look like shit today,” and all this stuff, and I remember this one day in class, he was like “I'm going to take my dog to prom 'cause it's prettier than all the girls in this school anyways.”

Further, participants described what I thought was an alarming reaction by boys when

girls purposefully fought the expectation that they make themselves appealing to men:

Bree-Ann: Like, *I Am Not An Object Day*, that made me mad, how all the boys came with their wifebeaters⁶ on, that was just so disrespectful.

Angela: There was this one day where you didn't wear makeup –

Bree-Ann: or do your hair, you wore sweatpants, it was just to show that we aren't objects, we don't have to dress up and be pretty every day. A whole bunch of people – it was a big worldwide thing, and a whole bunch of girls from our school ended up doing it, and a couple boys from school came wearing wife beaters, to be rude about it. I was like, that's so immature. I was actually really pissed about that.

Auburn: What was the significance of the wife beaters?

Bree-Ann: It was meant as an insult.

Angela: Yeah, it was like, “we overpower you.” It was pretty bad.

In fact, bullying often happened in a boys against girls style – older boys objectifying and, sometimes, terrifying grade nine girls, or boys verbally ganging up on a girl. Boys greatly outnumbered girls in this particular grade 12 class, and, according to interviewees, the males generally “ruled” the school in terms of who was cool, what clothes were acceptable, and which behaviours were preferred.

A further division within the school was students in the academic program versus those in the non-academic program. Interestingly, however, it was rare for bullying to be based on this particular grouping. Unlike students in different grades, who walked in the same halls and occasionally shared classes, students separated by their program were, quite literally, separated: In a different wing of the school and often out on job experience, non-academic students did not interact much with those in the academic stream. Bullying was not facilitated by their differences; in fact, it was diminished due to literal distancing.

Division by grade and academic program was due largely to the fact that students

6 Wifebeater is a common slang term for a white ribbed men's tank top. A definition from UrbanDictionary, a website designed to define slang terms, states “Its reputation comes from those wearing the shirts while engaged in domestic violence.”

from different programs and different grades logistically spent little time together.

Though bullying may or may not have been aided by these differences, it was obviously not the initial reason for the groupings. The harsher bullying of girls by boys, on the other hand, was not due to school separation into groups. I will delve into this, and other forms of gender-based bullying in the next section.

Girls also targeted girls, although interviewees did not mention this as often. There seemed to be more dissatisfaction with the failure of administration to take altercations between girls seriously, rather than concern over how much girl-to-girl bullying went on. In fact, Traci noted that girls (particularly after taking Women's Studies) would stand up for each other and band together against unfair treatment by boys. That girl bullying was less prevalent than other forms of bullying may speak to the fact that girls were outnumbered by boys in the grade 12 population, and they needed to protect each other.

It didn't seem to matter how you looked, or what you wore, or who your parents were; at some point during high school, bullying was inevitable. As Wanda wisely pointed out, "There's always going to be someone who picks on something about you." Much of that bullying, girls reported, goes on in the virtual world: Cyberbullying has become a serious problem resulting in crippled self-esteem and suicide (Aftab, 2011). Children target other children "using the Internet, interactive and digital technologies, or mobile phones" (np). Participants reported that Facebook and other forms of social media are a forum for students to publicly humiliate others while enjoying relative safety from the consequences they may face if teachers and/or parents overheard such insults. Even when students take advantage of the "block" or "unfriend" features available on social

media sites, rumours and slander could be rapidly shared with almost the entire student body. Girls mentioned that harassing texts were also a way youth got under each others' skin. With so many options available for targeting other students, bullying was alive and well at Vista View High.

Sexism and Gender-based Bullying

Gender-based bullying is any form of bullying that is rooted in gender (Meyer, 2009), and is “the most common form of school violence” (Anagnostopoulos, et al., 2009, p. 519). Violence in dating relationships, homophobia, and sexual harassment are considered the main forms of gender-based bullying; however, the form gender-based bullying takes varies from individual to individual.

While physical violence in dating relationships did not arise much in interviews, sexual pressure from boyfriends was a common theme – to have sex, as well as to engage in diverse sexual activities. *Youporn* videos and other media available on the internet allow youth access to more media than ever before. Mrs. Brown believes that the increased exposure to these videos has led boys to expect their girlfriends to engage in different sexual behaviours. For example, stripping has become common:

And then they're like, all the girls – you're sort of expected to strip now. One of the girls told us how her boyfriend made her strip for him. She was really uncomfortable, and didn't, like she felt embarrassed and she started crying, and then he told her, “Oh you're such a loser, can't you do anything right?”

Stripping, oral sex, anal sex, group sex, pseudo-lesbianism – all these and more have become common place in the porn world, and are insinuating themselves into teen lives as well (Pascoe, 2007, Pomerantz, 2008). Pressure to engage in diverse sexual behaviours is preceded by pressure to engage in sex in the first place – an activity girls are pushed

into, but then are punished for with a negative sexual reputation. In fact, when it comes to sex, girls are placed in a no-win situation: Targeted for being “tight” virgins or “loose” sluts, when it comes to engaging in sex (or not), girls' behaviour is never satisfactory to their peers.

Girls are mocked or treated with pitying disbelief when admitting virginity:

Wanda: We were in cosmetology, and these two girls were, like, talking about how, they were talking about sex and blah blah blah and how they can't believe people are still virgins in our grade and blah blah, and I was like “I'm a virgin” and they were like “Oh my god! I feel SO bad for you!” I was like, [incredulous] “Okay.”

However, once girls do engage in sex, they are also ridiculed for this behaviour. In the following instance we see a particularly harsh treatment of Maria, a sexually active girl:

Maria: But I think my confidence is at zero when it comes to pickin' up for myself, just 'cause, that whole rumor where people were [saying I was loose], and there was a huge rumor where I had STDs ... and I think I was in grade 7 when I started getting called a slut, and I was like, “What's a slut?” And then in grade 8 ... I started getting called a whore, and hews, huesey?

Auburn: Hussy?

Maria: Yeah, and like a prostitute and all that stuff, and like, I was in grade 7 the year that I went into a normal school, I was always in the Christian program and ... I didn't know what a bitch was, what a slut was ... I was just a shy, harmless child, and then I started getting called names, and I never knew how to pick up for myself, 'cause I never had to as a kid.

The unfairness of the sanctions against Maria is underscored by the fact that when the bullying began, she did not even know what the words meant, and even in this conversation, needs my guidance to remember a particular labeling word.

Boys, too, are pressured to lose their virginity, but, unlike the girls, do not face sanctions for being sexually active. Girls struggle with this double standard. Maria explained, “When a girl gets her first kiss, like, 'Oh shame on you.' If a boy does this with one girl, then it's 'Good job buddy.’” Similarly, Becky noted:

When it comes to guys and sex, it's like, oh you can have sex with 40 girls and you're awesome. And then when a girl has sex with like, five people, "Oh my GOD. Holy crap, how many people have you slept with?!"

However, this is not to say that boys are the benefactors of such expectations – the pressure on boys to lose virginity and have multiple sexual partners is not as much fun as it may sound. Young men are mocked for being virgins, and are constantly expected to prove and reaffirm their masculinity. These expectations are no small thing, and cannot be considered in depth in this study. Further consideration of the way boys experience masculine pressure can be found in detail in Pascoe's (2007) *Dude, You're a Fag*.

While verbal sexual harassment was more common, sexual assault did impact girls' lives during school hours. Angela, a particularly attractive but very shy girl, was the target of considerable unwanted sexual attention. She showed obvious discomfort with unsolicited male attention, but nevertheless was subjected to it quite frequently. One boy in particular repeatedly harassed her:

And then I remember this one time he pulled out his thing, um – [genital] area, and he was, like, grabbing it and he went to go touch my face with his hand, and I punched him! I was like "You do not touch me!" It was horrible, he used to do it to all – and he would make this sign with his, going like this [placing right index finger in a circle made with left thumb and index finger], to ask me to have sex with him. And I'd just be like, [shakes head, looking disgusted]. And I remember this one day he asked me if I was a virgin, and all this stuff, it was just horrible. And he'd go under my desk sometimes to go look up at me. It was really bad.

While not all girls faced repeated taunting like this, most experienced some form of sexual harassment at one time or another:

Carly: It's usually like a big group of guys and a couple girls, and it's always me sticking up for myself. ... 'Cause like, I have friends who say the c-word and stuff and there will be a big group, and I'll be like, "Okay guys, stop it," and then they'll all just start saying it.

Traci: The benches in the upper hallway, like some of the guys sit on there and they just watch girls go by and it's like, seriously?

Traci has pointed out another form of sexual harassment: the constant objectification that girls faced. Always aware that they were being watched, rated, mocked, and/or lusted after, girls felt anxious whether their looks were appreciated or not:

Angela: I remember this one thing was going around school, where it would be like who had the best ass in grade 12, and who had the best ass in grade 11, and who had the best body, the best boobs, all this stuff. It was horrible. I remember my sister coming home, she was like – the guys thought I had the best ass in grade 12, and it was just horrible. Like, no girl should go through that, even if she was rated the best, it's still not good, it still doesn't make you feel good about yourself.

Other studies have also shown objectification and sexual harassment to be prevalent and problematic in high schools (Meyer, 2009; Pascoe, 2007).

The final form of gender-based bullying is homophobia. Though I did see a small anti-homophobia poster on one of the school bulletin boards, participants indicated that the school was not welcoming to gay students – particularly gay boys. There was an increased tolerance for lesbians as long as they behaved in ways that were attractive to heterosexual men:

Becky: The guys are always like, “Oh that's hot, the girls blah blah.” But when a gay guy's holding another guy's hand, they're like “Oh that's disgusting! How could you do that?!” I'm like, okay, it's the same thing, they're just different sexes.

Aside from harassment of gay students (or rather, the sole gay student participants remembered ever being out at Vista View High) every-day language served to create an unwelcoming atmosphere for homosexual students.

Auburn: You said homophobia is a big problem –
Angela: In this school, yeah, really bad. Like guys will talk about it all the time, and they'll put each other down by saying “that's so gay” and “you're a

fag” and stuff like that.

Pascoe (2007) and Meyer (2009) talk about how the use of such language creates an atmosphere of anti-gay sentiment and – whether said to gay students or not – targets them for their sexuality.

Institutional Response to Student Hostilities

Many participants were dissatisfied with their school's response to bullying. Some girls claimed the school was reluctant to get involved with student quarrels and bullying, and that girls asking for help were accused of being responsible for causing their own bullying. Girls – particularly those who were bullied regularly – seemed to think the school lacked a plan or capacity to effectively respond to bullying:

Maria: The school board came in and I asked them so many questions, like “What are you guys going to do to improve, like decrease the bullying, sexism, and like, anything, like sexism coming from teachers, sexism coming from students?” And none of them had any answers, just, like, “Well we're just going to take things one step at a time” and just gave me bullshit answers, I'm like, “Okay, so what are you going to *do*?”

As this quote suggests, students also struggled, to some extent, with sexist teachers. Girls complained of feeling ogled and objectified by male teachers, of blatant favouritism to boys, and of teacher complacency when male students treated females disrespectfully:

Angela: The teacher was really creepy, Mr. [Dunst], he would stare down girls' shirts and check every girl out and stuff ... I remember writing a test and he ran his hand along the back of my chair, like rubbing my back as well, and I like, I stood up, I was like, “Don't do that.” It was really creepy.

Bree-Ann: We did have a teacher who said that he would prefer to have an all boys school because us girls are “whiny.”

Traci: Yeah he said he'd prefer to teach somewhere like Afghanistan where girls aren't legally allowed to go to school.

These girls describe instances where teachers objectify and touch them, and mock their

emotional and intellectual capacities, two very serious problems that create an unhealthy and unwelcoming atmosphere for girls' learning. That the teachers get away with such behaviour speaks to the power of males in authority positions.

Students are not the only ones dealing with this sort of thing: Female teachers also face a certain amount of sexism and disrespect from both their male colleagues and their older male students. Mrs. Brown told about her experiences as a young female teacher during earlier years teaching at Vista View High:

And as a young teacher, I went through a lot of sexual harassment from everyone, from my bosses, my colleagues, my students would sexually harass me, and there was no policy in place to protect female teachers at all.

Since then, her efforts, along with those of a group of young female lawyers who came to speak during a Women's Studies class, culminated in the development of a sexual harassment policy. However, Traci expressed some skepticism about the effectiveness of the policy, wondering if it was just there as a formality:

I was thinking like, do you think maybe that the sexual harassment policy was just created because it needed to be stopped, or because the principal was saying, "Oh I don't want parents to be all over me"?

Certainly, girls still experienced harassment quite regularly, but Mrs. Brown pointed out that the current situation was a vast improvement from years ago:

Gradually over the years, you know, things have changed. We have a harassment policy in our school, and so that's all stopped. I've seen a tremendous change over the years. But there's still room for improvement.

Nevertheless, some of the girls told stories of feeling victimized, and a few recognized that their young female teachers were also harassed. Angela said "I find they're [the boys] a lot, like, they're worse around female teachers." Other girls expressed similar sentiments during a focus group:

Auburn: You mentioned that they're old enough to –

Dee: Control, they feel like they can control. The grade 12ers, they can control the [female] teachers.

Auburn: Do you think intimidation is part of it?

Bree-Anne: I think for some guys, they do feel like –

Traci: Yeah, they're all obsessed with going to the gym.

I also heard other stories of boys asserting their masculinity in order to keep young female teachers on edge. While having supper with a few female teachers one night, I learned of an instance where a boy cut off his pubic hair and placed it on a young female teacher's keyboard. Although I can only speculate the exact intended significance of the act, it clearly had gendered and sexual connotations, and it was apparent that the experience was traumatic for the teacher. Pascoe (2007) also noted intimidation tactics used on young female teachers (and herself) as she researched masculine behaviour in high school.

A final way that Vista View High put women at a disadvantage, or allowed disadvantage to continue, was in their recent dis-allowance of a teen mom bringing her infant to class. Normally able to get a babysitter during her classes, one student occasionally had to either miss class, or bring the baby with her. According to interviewees, the baby was not disruptive during class time, and their friend was thus able to work towards her upcoming graduation while raising her child. Unfortunately, not long before I arrived at Vista View High, the young woman was told that her child was no longer welcome in the classroom. She thus had to find other ways to enable herself to attend all classes. Participants reported that this was creating difficulty for her – difficulty girls seemed to think was senseless and discriminatory:

Auburn: Someone mentioned to me today that someone has a baby and they were bringing it to class, and now they're not allowed to bring their kid to school anymore?

Wanda: Yes.

Jodi: I didn't know that!

Becky: The principal said that she wasn't allowed to bring her back.

Auburn: And what do you guys think about that?

Wanda: I think he's a dick.

Jodi: Seriously!

Becky: It's like, she's not causing any disruption in class, she's still doing her work and going to school. I respect that, that's awesome with her.

Jodi: Like you couldn't even tell in English when she came with her baby, you couldn't tell she was in class –

Becky: She'd come to class with her baby and maybe 20 minutes later it's like I didn't even know, I'd look over and be like “Oh! She's here!”

Traci also described the difficulties faced by this friend:

She's always worrying about her baby now. Like, when she's not with her, right? [Madison] only came to school like once a week, [Jane] only has like maybe two classes a day. So the other times she's back at home with the baby. But the other times, it's hard because she's trying to be with her baby all the time, 'cause she doesn't want her baby to be raised by everyone else. But at the same time, she really wants to graduate. That would be so hard, I can't imagine that.

Girls recognized the complications caused by this school decision, and felt it was unjust.

It is apparent that the school has some serious issues that need to be addressed.

Blatant sexism and harassment of female students and teachers may have been curbed as compared to previous decades, but the women in the school still faced numerous challenges. However, the school is not unique in its inadequacies, nor was it unusual when compared to adult society.

Facing Hostilities in Adult Society

Many of the hostilities adolescents, and adolescent girls in particular, face during school hours are also present, and sometimes even more pronounced, outside of school hours. Girls often spoke of sexual harassment and sexist comments in the workplace. While any instance of sexist targeting in a work environment is deplorable, some girls faced particularly hostile situations. Angela works in a male-dominated field and is

frequently subjected to taunting, objectification, and humiliation by her coworkers, which has resulted in her living with a real fear while at work:

And I go there to work, and yet I have to be really cautious and make sure – I remember this one time I was working by myself, 'cause I usually work with this one guy, but he wasn't there that day, but I was outside working, and this guy came out and he just stood there staring at me for 20 minutes. And I was so scared he was going to come rape me, there was nobody out there, I was all by myself, just with this guy staring at me. It was horrible. I'm kind of scared to work there.

Bree-Anne described a situation where her friend was asked to “go into the back office and have a quickie” with one of the men she worked with. Traci, working at a fitness facility, faced objectifying comments on almost a daily basis. Maria was told by her boss to dress more sexily, to meet “the standard of men.” These girls, not yet graduated from high school, had already experienced sexual harassment and sexist expectations – not just from boys their own age, but already in the workplace, from employers, co-workers, and customers. Generally the girls were angered by these situations and recognized them as wrong, but did not have the tools or experience to resist them.

Positive School Spirit

In pursuing my focus on prejudice and problems in school, I rarely asked about measures the school was taking to improve the bullying situation; however, it was occasionally mentioned. Students had lavish praise for Mrs. Brown, saying she was an “awesome” teacher who had intelligent things to say in her challenging but fun classroom. While Mrs. Brown obviously received the most attention in our interviews since the research focused on her Women's Studies class, students generally spoke favourably about most of their teachers, and seemed to feel that most teachers supported

them, and could be turned to for help when needed.

The school did have a harassment policy, and while it may not have been infallible, it did improve the atmosphere and gave students and teachers something to refer to when things went poorly. Furthermore, Vista View High participated in the pink-shirt anti-bullying day in an effort to raise awareness about and minimize bullying. Students reported that the school had a zero-tolerance policy for physical bullying and abuse and that, as a result, such situations were relatively rare. While homophobia remained a problem at Vista View, the school had hung a poster touting acceptance of all sexualities.

While students lamented the lack of interesting options offered by the school, something city schools with large populations could easily rival, several of them noted that Vista View High did well considering its circumstances, and the courses that were available were delivered with quality instruction. The school also offered a comprehensive trades program, which seeks to set many students (almost entirely male, according to interview responses) up with a promising career, right out of high school.

Interviewees were very pleased that their school offered such an unusual course as Women's Studies. Schools are important sites from which to conduct research on adolescents (Pomerantz, 2008; Sadowski, 2008) as they are significant places where young people negotiate their adolescence. The presence of a counter-hegemonic course such as Women's Studies in the school context provides students with an alternative to established mainstream discourses. Through Women's Studies, which in the next chapter I frame within feminist anti-oppressive analysis, girls gained the knowledge and tools necessary to resist many of the hostilities they encountered in school.

Chapter Five: Women's Studies Curriculum

Women's and Gender Studies in Western Canada

Given the non-inclusive atmosphere present in Vista View High, it is curious that this, of all 1300+ schools in the three westernmost Canadian provinces, is one of only five that offer a Women's Studies course. All Women's Studies classes in British Columbia and Alberta are the result of a locally developed curriculum (BAA, 2011; personal communication with Government of and Alberta, May 23, 2010), which is normally spurred by one determined female teacher taking it upon herself to develop a course that contributes towards “fixing a problem” she sees in the school. This is the case with Vista View High.

In this chapter, I first explore how the class came about, and the purpose for which it was designed. In my exploration of the history, philosophy, and rationale behind the course, I rely heavily on a document developed in conjunction with the course. Due to confidentiality reasons, I cannot properly acknowledge this source, as identification would make it possible to identify Vista View High's true name and location. Thus, as much as possible, I paraphrase rather than quote from the document in order to depict the course's purpose.

Next, I provide a description of the course curriculum, looking at the format of the course, topics covered, guest speakers, assignments, and administration of grades. Finally, I describe Mrs. Brown and her impact on the class. An examination of this dynamic instructor is essential to understanding her course, and will provide a well-rounded perspective on exactly how Women's Studies plays out for students.

History, Philosophy and Rationale of Vista View Women's Studies:

Women's Studies, a three credit optional course at Vista View High, had been offered for 15 years before I conducted my research. The course has evolved with time, and is described by its teacher, Mrs. Brown, as somewhat fluid. Changing times, the rising of new issues, and guest speakers – who might come and go, or have different experiences to share from year to year – keep things fresh. The course was locally developed by teachers in Vista View, and is only offered at Vista View High. It was first created as a response to several concerns that had risen regarding the female student population at Vista View High. It was hoped that the course would help counter the high prevalence of teen pregnancy and eating disorders, and boost girls' initiative in school. A few Vista View teachers had come to realize that much of the school's curricula “offered little in the way of women’s knowledge and experience” and that the Women's Studies course served to fill in missing information about women.

The course was rationalized as necessary for many reasons, but most fundamentally because it provides a forum where students can gather information about the female body and about issues concerning women, to which they were otherwise not being exposed during school hours. While the course is geared towards empowering girls, boys are also encouraged to attend, since knowledge of women's history and issues is significant regardless of sex. Just as it is crucial for girls to attend and understand regular classes, boys, if given the chance, can greatly benefit from Women's Studies.

The course description notes an absence of women in regular curricula, the need to empower girls to use their voice and develop analytical capacity, and the importance of

involving community members in the education of youth. It points out that the Women's Studies course was designed as a complement to other disciplines. The course adds to the traditionally male-centred curriculum by emphasizing societal contributions made by women. Thus, Women's Studies employs a broad range of knowledge. The course is intended to “promote critical awareness and appreciation of the diverse experience of women” while filling in missing information regarding women in history. Misconceptions about women and their bodies, achievements, mental ability, and so-called appropriate activities are challenged. Further thought and inquiry about women and their capabilities are encouraged. The Vista View High Women's Studies course employs interdisciplinary teaching methods to encourage students to “critically assess the extent to which past, current, and emerging models of knowledge reflect the diversity of women’s experiences.” The course gives students analytical tools, useful in any area of study.

The Women's Studies curriculum rationale asserts that Women's Studies classes provide an arena where everyone is granted equality and given the opportunity to share, where “the opinions, experiences, and thoughts of *all* students are valued.” Thus, students not only learn about the world around them, but are also given the space to form their own, educated (but personal) opinions about that world. Further, they are taught to appreciate the importance of having a choice, while respecting choices made by others. Students are encouraged to “develop their voice” through the class, regardless of their level of academic achievement or personal background.

A particularly important part of the course is the way it fosters connections between community members and students. A major feature of the course is that diverse

guest speakers, who share their knowledge and experience with the class, are brought in frequently. Women's Studies was developed to empower and enlighten all who become involved, regardless of their gender or age, and guest speakers often consider attending the class an opportunity for their own growth. More on this, and the transformative nature of the class, can be found in Chapter Six.

Curriculum

Class Lay-out and Structure

The course is designed to encourage reflection and critical thinking; girls are not expected to memorize and regurgitate, but rather must critically engage with course materials, as well as material gathered on their own, in order to receive marks. Much of their work is done in a journaling format, where they describe something they saw or learned. They follow this description with a written response to that information, analyzing the material and detailing their personal reaction to it.

Additional deliberation on topics is encouraged through the classroom structure: Extensive discussion periods allow students to share their thoughts, experiences, and feelings regarding each topic covered in the curriculum. Further, discussions often bring new topics to light, thereby increasing the amount of information being covered in class. The discussion format allows students to engage on a deeply thoughtful level with the material. More than just delving into their own personal reactions, students are expected to connect the dots between politics, society, and the general impact of these on women's lives.

Discussions are enhanced by a unique placement of students, guest speakers, and

the course teacher: Everyone, no matter their age, level of education, or status in the school, sits in a circle.⁷ The circle is used to keep everyone on an equal plane, to facilitate personal involvement, and to signify respect for all people involved. To ensure everyone has a chance to speak, a small item is passed around the circle. Upon receiving the token, each person shares their opinion, a personal story, or how they feel about what is being discussed. The circle, keeping everyone on the same level, reminds everyone that respect for the diverse opinions, stories, and feelings is highly important.

Topics

Students begin the course by learning basic theoretical concepts to allow them to apply a feminist analysis to future units. Girls learn about feminist theoretical approaches, the different waves of feminism, and, perhaps most fundamentally, to value the words and experiences of women despite the shunning and omission of women from their usual curriculum.

The coursework then moves into an in-depth study of “Women in Herstory,” where students learn about women's role in the past, suffrage, the evolution of laws pertaining to specifically female issues, First Nations women's struggle, feminist movements, the history of midwifery and witch hunts, and other events involving women of the past. All are significant historical events that nonetheless tend to be left out of regular high school curricula.

During interviews, when girls expressed having felt surprised when they learned about the herstory of the women's rights movement, I recalled being astonished as a second year university student first beginning to learn the extensive herstory of women

⁷ Learning circles originate in traditional First Nations knowledge.

that was completely left out of my high school curricula – I was stunned that such a rich history existed, and that I had never previously been exposed to it. These feelings were echoed during the following conversation between Janelle and me:

Auburn: What did you think of the history?

Janelle: It's crazy, like a lot of the movies we watched and the stories and stuff, it was bad!

Auburn: Yeah. Was it news to you?

Janelle: Yeah, never. I'd never like imagined it was like that.

Auburn: Do you find that odd, that you only learn about that in a Women's Studies class?

Janelle: Mmhm! You should learn about that, like social studies, it could be in that. But it's like they try to keep that out because people should be ashamed of it I guess. But it should be taught, 'cause people need to know what happened, like how it affected everyone.

Janelle's surprise and dismay were telling: Basic common sense might suggest that leaving such significant events out of a high school history curriculum leaves a very incomplete story; nevertheless, what Women's Studies students learned about women in history was news to them.

Mrs. Brown moves from women in history to a consideration of women and the media. She pushes the girls to think about the messages media sends to women and the portrayal of women in advertisements, movies, music videos, and pornography. She encourages students to think about the impact media might have on women, and how they might want to critically engage when next they were seated in front of a magazine or their television. Girls often talked about body image and unrealistic expectations for women during interviews; they felt they were supposed to fit into an impossible mold, and failure to do so had consequences. Research (Coulter, 2011, Pomerantz, 2008) suggests that girls are indeed influenced by media representation, though they are not wholly determined by it. Girls in this study became more critical of media as they covered the material in this

unit, and many ceased to bother trying to fit the media mold.

Students also learned about women from different cultures, both in a worldwide sense when they studied gender equality in nations ranging from so-called Third World countries to Scandinavian countries, and in their own back yard, when local First Nations women came to talk about their cultures. The class discussed religious perspectives of women from various backgrounds, women and poverty, female genital mutilation, and educational rights for women in other countries. Many participants expressed their interest in learning how different life could be for women in other parts of the world. Here we see an example of girls learning about a different “Other” than themselves – rather than the usual *Education for the Other* (Kumashiro, 2000) seen in the course, in this section they engaged in *Education about [another] Other*.

They also expressed keen interest in learning more about themselves and their own bodies. Two topics often left out of health and science curricula, women's bodies and health, were tackled head-on in Women's Studies. First menses, alternative menstrual products, various forms of birth control, breast feeding, pregnancy and childbirth, cosmetic surgery, eating disorders, and much more were discussed in class, with girls permitted to ask questions and really come to an understanding and appreciation of their bodies. Guest speakers such as the public health nurse, a breastfeeding mother, and someone who struggled with an eating disorder were relied on to bring first-hand information to the students. Girls expressed delight in the “un-stigmatizing” of their bodies and the comfortable atmosphere present for learning about their bodies:

Bree-Anne: I personally feel more comfortable with a woman teacher. 'Cause when you're talking about menstruation and stuff like that, like, 'kay, I feel

comfortable talking about it with women, but not a man, 'cause it's kind of awkward, 'cause they don't really know anything. So yeah, I like having a woman teacher better, 'cause then they see it through our eyes, and not like, male eyes, right? It's better that way I find.

Students also appreciated having guest speakers come in to tell their stories, as did Mrs.

Brown:

Different women come in for breast feeding, eh? But, I had some that are just incredibly dynamic... this guy in McDonalds told [one breastfeeding mother] she was disgusting. And she said, like she had a little receiving blanket pinned to her shoulder, she was like, “I swear to God, he could not have possibly seen anything.” And he says, “You should be in the bathroom” and she's like “I'm not feeding my baby in that disgusting washroom. You go eat your hamburger in the washroom.”

This particular guest speaker would have a multiple impact: Girls were exposed to some of the mechanics of breastfeeding, learned how mothers can be stigmatized (even for sustaining their infants in the way their bodies were designed to do so), and were given an example of a strong woman standing up for herself and her rights in the face of male sexist oppression. Much of the material focusing on the female body was like this – not only learning what was happening, physically, but also recognizing and problematizing the stigma women face for their bodies (particularly menstruation, pregnancy, and childbirth), and how such stigma is rooted in sexist notions. Girls learned that they could be proud of their bodies.

Women's paid and unpaid labour was another eye-opener for girls, who were often unaware of the struggle women have faced, and continue to face, in being stigmatized in non-traditional work roles. Topics, such as the history of women's work, juggling childcare and work, traditional versus non-traditional women's work, and the glass ceiling were discussed. Again, Mrs. Brown had some great memories of spunky guest speakers

who provided inspiration to the girls:

We had the first female town councilor come to Women's Studies too, and she said at the first meeting in this town, where she appeared as the first woman on town council, they passed her a pad and paper and told her she could be the secretary. And she said “No, I don't like that job. Someone else is going to have to do it.”

[A guest speaker] told the girls how, I think they all walked off the job because they were told they couldn't wear pants to work one day. So this – she was an older gal, right? And they [the students] were like, “No way! You can't get fired for wearing pants!” And she was like “Oh, yeah!”

While many barriers have been broken regarding women in the workforce, economic gender equality has not yet been reached in Canada, where a wage gap, childcare, and sexism continue to hamper professional women's careers (Hausmann, Tyson, & Zahidi, 2010). Students learn to more critically assess the current work situation, including the problematic nature of the wage gap, discrimination and sexism in the workplace, and women's limited access to promotions.

Participants related being affected heavily when learning about violence against women. A guest speaker, well known to many of the girls, shared a story of rape from her past that they had never known before. Hearing a respected person speak of such an experience made the students think twice about judging their peers who may have experienced similar situations:

Wanda: I think when [a guest speaker] came in and she talked about when she got raped. Because, it's like, that can happen to anyone. It doesn't matter who you are or what you're doing, it can happen. So that was an important one.....you could tell when someone's sittin' there and crying, you can tell that might have happened to them, so it kind of impacted everyone, 'cause it's like, well it already happened to all these girls, it can happen to anyone.

The class also discusses domestic violence, violence against sex workers, and human trafficking. Mrs. Brown informed me that most years the students take a field trip to the

local women's transition house, where girls can see the services that are available, should they or a friend need them. Unfortunately, the year that I studied the class, Mrs. Brown was unable to take the students to the women's shelter. However, survey respondents from past years spoke highly of the trip.⁸ Prior to the class visit, it seemed that most students were unaware of the existence of the Women's Transition House in their community. Considering Statistics Canada's report of higher rates of spousal violence against women occurring in Western Canada (AuCoin, 2005), it is problematic that girls were previously unaware of services available to abused women.

If there was time available after covering these main units, the class could talk about women in sports, women in education, women and the law, women and music, and any other number of topics. However, due to the heavy load of information and the deep discussions engaged in by the class, Mrs. Brown told me that it is quite rare for the class to have time to delve into other topics – even though students might be very interested in those extras. Traci, for example, commented:

Yeah, there was some stuff I would have liked to go into more detail with, like women across cultures. And the women in sports and education. For sure.

Girls did not feel saturated with knowledge about women; rather, they wanted to return to the class in order to learn more about the topics already covered, and to look at other exciting topics. More about increasing the availability of the class can be found in Chapter Six.

⁸ Mrs. Brown noted that one year, the transition house workers later informed her that a boy who was a part of the class ended up taking his mother to the shelter for help shortly after the class visit.

Assignments

Assignments differ from that expected in traditional high school homework; instead they encouraged creativity while expecting strong effort and quality work. As mentioned earlier, students are asked to write extensively, using a binder separated into three sections: one for keeping detailed notes, another for reporting on their thoughts regarding each day's topic, and a final section for bringing extra material in and considering it with a critical eye. Students commented to me that they felt quite safe expressing themselves in this journaling project. Students are marked based on the extent and quality of work put into their binders, including completeness, organization, and maturity in the level of thought.

Students also complete a few unit-specific assignments and quizzes throughout the term, testing their knowledge and comprehension of course topics. At the end of the year, they are expected to complete a major research project of their own creation, worth 30% of the final grade. The girls tended to choose final projects they found meaningful:

Carly: I made a book, it was kind of a scrap book, but I got as many people as I could to help... And like, I got guys to help, and a guy printed off a picture of a female hockey player, and he put like, one of the [Olympic souvenir] coins, and he's like "women are champions" and guys and girls helped, and it's just like, about, how awesome women can be and how awesome we are. I loved it. I still have it, too.

Traci: One girl, she made this, she's very artistic, so she made this really cool art representation of, almost like the Dove campaign, like love yourself kind of thing. So she had this girls hand here, and she had ribbons, like a bow tied around one finger and the ribbons coming down, and it said "don't forget to love your body" like the ribbon, don't forget, kind of thing. ... And that was her project. So you could do anything you want, just kind of bring your own talent to what you're doing I guess.

Presenters' obvious passion underscored the significance of each project to classmates.

Grading of Student Work

Putting grades on personal assignment had the potential to negatively impact the girls; this was a complicated topic to ask about. Depending on previous interview conversation, I phrased the question slightly differently for each interview, hoping it would be clear. For example, one time when I was asked to rephrase the question, I said “I wonder, I guess, if it being graded makes the message different.” In another interview, I asked the question this way: “Was it weird to be graded on stuff that was really personal to you?” Interviews were meant to be flexible, and asking the question in an inconsistent manner was not at issue. Regardless of how I asked the question, participants did not think being graded on their work was a big issue. Carly stated this quite clearly: “No, I don't think it – no, not at all.” In fact, girls stated that not only did being graded not really impact the work, but, in the grand scheme of things, grades were inconsequential anyway – the content and experience during the class were more important:

Rachael: No. The mark we got for that class, I don't think it was the most important part of the class.

Becky: I didn't really think of it as getting marks, I thought of it as something new and interesting that I had learned.

Wanda: It didn't feel like we were getting marked on it. It felt like we were all sitting around, talking, being, just talking in a group. It didn't feel like she was marking us or anything.

Despite these responses, I believe that the grading of the work in classes such as this does have the potential to alter the atmosphere present – traditional classrooms reject respect for students in favour of enforcing obedience to authority, and grading can be used as punishment (Crabtree & Sapp, 2003). As discussed in Chapter Two, feminist teaching practices encourage cooperation over competition, and work to empower students. Having

Mrs. Brown grade assignments could upset the power balance in the classroom, tarnishing the equality exemplified in circle discussions. However, in this class, it did not seem to do so. This shows that, in a high school situation, quality teaching and a feeling of mutual respect can contribute to a safe atmosphere even when one person (the teacher) is in power position.

Women's Studies Guest Speakers

Consistent with anti-oppressive teaching practices that decentres the instructor (Kumashiro, 2000), guest speakers were an important part of the class. Mrs. Brown delighted in finding new, inspiring women to tell their story to her class. Some of the guest speakers only came to talk to one class, while others returned, year after year. I spoke with two such guest speakers, who had been to the class at least three different times. They described the experience as positive, and indicated that they felt important in the sharing of their story. Each year, they both told me, at least one student from the class would seek her out to thank her and say how much her story had impacted them.

Participants also told me how they were affected by the guest speakers. Often, when I asked about their favorite part of the class, participants responded it was “the guest speakers!” When I probed about which guest speakers were particularly good, some of the girls would simply inform me that they all were.

A vast majority of guest speakers are female. None of the girls mentioned male guest speakers, and I only caught a hint in a passing conversation with Mrs. Brown that, in the past, a male police officer would come talk to the class about reporting sexual assault. Mrs. Brown highly valued the stories of other women, and kept the focus of

Women's Studies on women by using, almost exclusively, female guest speakers in the class. These guests were an integral part of the course: They presented information and represented the diversity of women's experience. Guest speakers allowed Mrs. Brown to take a step back as instructor, and reinforced that all experiences and opinions should be respected – not just those of the class teacher.

Course Instruction: Strategies used by Mrs. Brown

To introduce Mrs. Brown, I share a great comment from the interviews:

Maria: She's kick-ass, that's what I love, that's when I came to realize that I'm in love with Mrs. Brown! I was like, “She is like the Woman Jesus!”

The success of the class was due in large part to the excellent teaching skills of Mrs. Brown. Students – even those who seemed to struggle in other areas of school – had high praise for Mrs. Brown. When I first met her in person, I noticed her easy nature and willingness to smile and laugh at almost anything. She is easy to talk to and I found her very likable. I was reminded of a teacher Pascoe (2007) described as “short in stature, sporting high heels and an enormous personality, Ms Mac infused the learning process with life and laughter,” and “was one of the most popular and effective teachers at River High” (p. 31). Certain teachers approach their instruction in a way that makes learning fun; Mrs. Brown was one of these people. She is a kind and giving person with a wonderful sense of humour and a refreshingly direct way of communicating. Perhaps most surprising was how much effort *she* put into *my* research project – introducing me to participants, collecting parental consent forms, and ensuring I was welcomed.

Perhaps the most basic thing girls appreciated about Mrs. Brown was that she was the same sex as them, and dealt with the same biological concerns. They felt comfortable

learning about women's health issues from a female teacher. At the same time, however, Mrs. Brown had the insight to bring in multiple guest speakers in order to have a variety of views presented in class:

Mrs. Brown: And I think if the course is such that so many guest speakers come in, you're not putting yourself off as the expert on being a woman, the whole idea is, "What do *you* think, how do *you* think it should be?"

Mrs. Brown loves to hear what other women think about an issue, and while she has strong opinions, she is also quick to point out that she is not the expert on "womanity."

Humility was important to her instruction method.

Girls also feel comfortable with Mrs. Brown because she is considered very real – honest, true to herself and the girls, Mrs. Brown does not put up a facade with students.

When I asked how she acts in class she was surprised at the question at first:

Mrs. Brown: [laughs] I don't know. I think I'm just me. The same as when I teach English! You know one thing they can't handle is a phony, right? ... But yeah, I think bein' – just be real! And then you know, if I don't know something, I say "I don't know! You're going to have to look that one up."

Mrs. Brown does not just talk the talk – students also called her honest and echoed her use of the word "real":

Tanya: I liked how Mrs. Brown compared everything to real life. She showed us videos and stuff, but she related everything to actual real life, current events, and even to her own life.

Mrs. Brown also connects with her students through her sense of humour which made awkward topics easy to tackle:

Angela: It was funny, and it would be awkward with another teacher, talking about your period and stuff, but she made it funny, and it wasn't hard to talk about it in front of the class because she made it okay.

Wanda: She made it more fun, so it was like "Okay!" not like [appalled tone] "Oh my god." It was more interesting and it was like, okay, now I understand

it.

Mrs. Brown's deviation from traditional teaching practices proved – in her class – to be an effective way to help her students learn. Relying on anti-oppressive teaching practices such as discussion, the sharing of stories, involving guest speakers, and learning through self-application, Mrs. Brown was able to engage the girls: They came to care greatly about what they were learning and take the knowledge beyond the class. For example, Angela became so passionate that she ended up summoning the courage to demand respect from her extraordinarily sexist grandfather, whose oppressive views became too much for her.

Mrs. Brown also encouraged the girls to engage with the material in fun ways. Almost all of the participants mentioned at some point the “menstrual party” where they ate red cupcakes, decorated the room in red sheets, played games, and did role play. Another memorable moment was when they learned – by acting out a play in which students took on various roles as physical parts of the female reproductive system – about various methods of birth control. That girls could remember these assignments was testament to their effectiveness: I interviewed the students approximately one year after they had taken the class, and the lesson content had stuck with them for all those months.

Mrs. Brown is also instrumental in the success of the class through her passion about the subject matter. Participants knew how important the class is to Mrs. Brown, which impacted their reception of the information as well:

Rachael: You could tell she really was passionate about what she was teaching, and so it made it a lot easier to get into it too.

Tanya: She very much reaches out to that class, it's obviously her favorite to teach. So it had that environment. But yet there was a learning aspect to it

too, which was good.

Students felt that they were privileged to have Mrs. Brown as a teacher, and enjoyed the way she obviously knew what she was talking about and would get “right into” the conversations.

Further, Mrs. Brown's conviction in the girls' capability was not missed by participants. Many girls felt more confident simply from knowing that at least one person thought they were worthwhile:

Angela: I think she thinks that every girl has the potential to be amazing and do whatever she wants, and whatever it is, be amazing at it. And like, she does believe that it is harder for women because of ... all the stuff that you have to put up with. She still thinks that every one of us could do it.

Jodi: She's my favorite teacher and I talk to her about a lotta stuff, right, just like, after Women's Studies, I'd go to her, and every time she tells me, be proud of who I am, right? It doesn't matter what skin colour I have. And it's like, at least someone appreciates me.

In casual conversation, I learned that Mrs. Brown's appreciation of the girls was very genuine. Even when students were not realizing what she saw as their full potential, she felt that they already were amazing, and would eventually become even more so.

While her personality, passion, honesty, and deep-rooted conviction in young women's capability were mentioned most often, a couple of participants noted a downside to Mrs. Brown's personality as well. Along with her passion and unwavering conviction came a strong-mindedness that sometimes felt silencing to the girls. Angela pointed out “It's kind of like, she's really, really opinionated, so it's hard some of the times.” Girls both admired and were a bit cautious of Mrs. Brown's boldness – they appreciated it, particularly since it was generally used to their benefit. If it were not for Mrs. Brown's tenacity, it is probable the Women's Studies course would have been

canceled, but they also felt a bit intimidated when it came to disagreeing with her views. Nevertheless, students unanimously described Mrs. Brown as a very good teacher.

Mrs. Brown's pedagogy fits within an anti-oppressive education paradigm. She employs a praxis that is both feminist and anti-oppressive that inheres in her classroom and in her professional relations with students and staff. Interview responses showed that she demonstrates caring towards her students, and brings equality into classroom interactions. Further, lesson content itself is anti-oppressive in that it acknowledges and problematizes oppression within Canada, providing students with critical analysis skills. The pedagogical strategy employed by Mrs. Brown is essential to class success.

Vista View Women's Studies: Strong Education

Consistent with feminist notions about the strength of sharing and collaboration, Mrs. Brown enlisted several teachers and community members to help create the course some 15 years ago. She has allowed the course to shift with the times to best meet the needs of her students. Rather than assuming her own beliefs are sufficient education for her students, Mrs. Brown demonstrates feminist praxis by relying strongly on other women (guest speakers) to share important knowledge with students. The course covers a broad range of topics, from the female body to the history of the women's movement, all of which are missing from the current high school curriculum in Western Canada. Including these normally "oppressed topics" in the curriculum is in keeping with anti-oppressive education, which calls on instructors to teach such uncomfortable, hidden truths. The course provides more than the knowledge written on paper: It provides confidence and strong self-worth, thereby empowering students. Ng (2008) argues that a

“more holistic pedagogy” (p. 1) is needed in schools to allow for the fact that learning happens on the mental, physical, and emotional levels. Other studies have also found personal pedagogical approaches to be effective at connecting students to their education on more than a strictly academic level (Petrie et al, 2009). Girls were not just empowered through the new knowledge they gained through the class; rather, they connected with each other, learned about themselves, and gained confidence through the class. These and other class benefits will be explored next.

Chapter Six: Course Benefits

Appreciative Inquiry of Women's Studies Course

The goal of this chapter is to demonstrate the value Vista View Women's Studies course had for students. It relies heavily on interview quotations to demonstrate this. Which qualities of the course were essential to its positive impact are discussed first, followed by a consideration of the importance of establishing a comfortable atmosphere for the girls. Next, I delve into the development of a broader knowledge base and heightened critical awareness in the girls. These skills support girls in seeing the world analytically and understanding the social structures that affect their lives. In the following section, the many different ways in which participants felt increased confidence, and how the underlying nature of the classroom and curriculum contributed to their empowerment by offering respect, validating personal experience, and educating personally relevant topics are discussed. How the class has impacted girls' day-to-day lifestyle and their plans for the future, two important measures of the success of the class in aiding girls to live healthier, happier lives, are detailed. Finally, the girls' desire that this and similar classes be more widely available in a variety of contexts is discussed.

Benefits of the Unique Course Format

This Women's Studies class provides unique education, specifically designed with girls in mind, as what Kumashiro (2000) calls anti-oppressive *Education for the Other* (p. 26). In this approach, Kumashiro argues “educators need to acknowledge and affirm differences and tailor their teaching to the specifics of their student population” (p. 29). In putting girls' needs and interests first, the course mitigates some of the negative effects of

their sexist school surroundings.

Girls' eyes were opened to alternate teaching styles, and the focus on women validated their experience. Women's Studies was less rigid than regular classes, allowing for students to explore their feelings regarding material covered, and discuss different views. Anna, a survey respondent, described the class as follows:

It was a lot less formal [than other classes]. Mrs Brown's classes are always interesting, and the same was true of Women's Studies. The material was a lot more personal than in say, math (obviously). Some days we cried.

Just as North (2007) discovered in her study of anti-oppressive classrooms, the difference from regular high school courses was significant, keeping students interested on both emotional and intellectual levels. Roxanne pointed out the contrast to other classes, musing, "There was room for more discussion in that class, and everyone participated, compared to other classes." Group participation and discussion contributed to girls' empowerment and were a significant difference from the traditional format found in most high school settings. Feeling validated through class discussion countered the typical discounting of girls seen in Vista View High and elsewhere.

Women's Studies is also unique in that the usual student-teacher relationship – where the teacher is seen as expert and the student as an empty cup to be filled with whatever information the teacher provides – is missing. Instead, teacher knowledge was not unquestionable, and students were able to voice their own opinions without fear of reprisal. A guest speaker who had spoken in the class three times, noted this difference:

Marsha: It's almost like it's not that student-teacher, like that kind of disappears in that class. It's more like a bunch of people trying to discuss their concerns and help each other. It's very different than every class I've ever been in before.

Marsha hints at how the different, more collaborative approach in the class allowed for something special to develop – a mutual respect and support that some of the students named a “sisterhood of women.”

Girls talked about this connection – sisterhood – helping them to feel proud of and connected to their sex both socially and personally:

Angela: There were girls [in the class] that I never really talked to, that I talk to now because of it. And I found that in that class we were all a group, not just an individual. We were all together, learning the same things and feeling the same stuff.

Bree-Anne: Yeah, exactly. Mrs. Brown was like, “It’s a sisterhood,” right? Like all women are a sister. I totally agree with that now.

Angela: You didn’t feel alone in that class at all, not once.

Uda (Survey Respondent): It really spoke to me as a developing woman. It was so much more personal and poignant. I could really relate to the issues we discussed and researched. You feel a deeper connection with your own gender. This class isn’t about man bashing or hatred.⁹ It is about strength, ownership and growth.

Much connection and growth were enabled by the Women’s Studies class.

Advantages of the Comfortable Class Atmosphere

The circular seating arrangement facilitated discussion and equality within the classroom: no one person was in charge, and everyone’s opinions were important. Girls felt more at ease in the circle, and it was clear they understood its significance:

Traci: I liked how every class we moved our desks into a circle, so it kind of showed that we’re all equal, and we could see everybody, I liked that we could see everybody’s reactions.

Bree-Anne: And we all got to say what we wanted, ‘cause we had to pass a doll around or something, or a rabbit, a Barbie. And then when we got it, we got to say what we thought about what she was talking about, and then we had to say our opinions, and then we’d get to hear everybody else’s too, and

⁹ Unfortunately, girls talked about boys (who did not take the class) and some male teachers and administrators, assuming Women’s Studies was anti-male. In fact, when I was in the middle of a casual conversation with two male staff, one of them a senior administrator, I got the impression that they felt the course was demeaning to men

then you'd get to write your feedback on it. It was kind of nice to see everybody's point of view.

The circle emphasized that all people in the class, and their opinions, were important. Whether girls agreed with each other or not, they were expected to respect one another and their beliefs. Not only was the class respectful and equal, it also tended to have an informal, fun tone. Students felt comfortable, even though they were frequently addressing particularly uncomfortable topics.

The class year that I studied was unique in that all of the students were girls; every previous year, Mrs. Brown told me, had at least one boy in the class. This year, however, the one boy who signed up for the class dropped it shortly after it started, and the girls enjoyed the all-female safe space:

Janelle: Everyone in there just had something in common. We were all in the same class, and it was all girls too. That was neat.

Dee: I really enjoyed the all-girls class.

The appreciation of the all-girls atmosphere was also voiced by Roxanne:

Auburn: Speaking of the girls, would it have been different if there were guys in there?

Roxanne: I think it would have been way different. I don't think girls would have opened up as much if there were guys in the class.

While this sentiment, echoed by other girls, is certainly understandable, none of the survey respondents, who were in mixed-gender Women's Studies classes, remarked on feeling awkward that there were boys in the class, and none mentioned that it should be only open to women (or self-identified women). Further, Mrs. Brown noted that in her fifteen years of teaching the class, male classmates were just as much a part of the group after only a couple weeks. Regardless of whether there were boys in the class or not, it

took a bit of time to establish the comfortable atmosphere; either way, she says it has always developed within a few weeks.

Although the girls were not all friends and there were occasional conflicts, they also understood that they shared common ground. Finding commonalities with their female peers helped to lessen the competitive tendencies seen between girls in high schools. Participants recognized that they were a part of something bigger than their own personal issues, and, as Rachael put it, “most of the time that [conflict] was just left at the door.” However, this was not always the case; a deeper consideration of the impacts of disagreements in class can be found in the next chapter.

Words such as safe, open, informal, trust, and fun arose frequently during interviews. While the class covered some very serious and disturbing topics such as rape and abuse of women, it was not always an extremely intense atmosphere; in fact, Traci said “I think [Mrs. Brown] made us laugh at least once a day.” Even on the days when things got emotional, the class managed to enjoy some humour. Other days, the girls told me, were highly enjoyable, with everyone listening and laughing together. Maintaining positivity was important in keeping girls happy and empowered, and avoiding feelings of discouragement. Further, regardless of whether they were laughing or crying, it seems students really retained what they were learning, adding new, important knowledge to their repertoire. Having a clear understanding of topics they felt were important was empowering for girls – they felt intelligent in their new knowledge.

Empowerment Through Knowledge and Critical Awareness

As detailed in chapter four, the course curriculum covered a wide variety of topics.

While participants generally agreed that virtually the entire course was “awesome,” some topics that were covered struck many of the girls as particularly important; they remembered these clearly. The way these topics stayed with girls enabled them to continue to critically analyze their surroundings long after the class ended. Here I discuss three especially important topics that many girls mentioned.

Menstruation and the Female Body

Learning about menstruation in a fun, female-centred, and non-threatening atmosphere was very important to many of the girls. Mrs. Brown expressed frustration that many girls today are just as ashamed of their bodies as she was when she was a young woman. She tried to ensure girls not only learn about their bodies, but come to appreciate them without shame. Girls often mentioned that learning important information about their periods became a fun experience in Women's Studies:

Bree-Anne: And everything [for the menstrual party] was red, like, all the food was red, we had red juice, red jello, red cakes.

Traci: And then we did like, a play for the menstrual cycle too.

[all laughing]

Dee: That was funny!

Making discussing menstruation fun removed some of the shame and awkwardness girls felt about their periods. Although things were fun and silly during the menstrual party, the importance of the information learned was not lost on the girls; here, Moira expressed frustration that the female body was not adequately discussed in science classes:

Moira: In biology and stuff, they took out the pictures in the textbook and they *just* re-added them, of women. So it's pretty crazy. And in Women's Studies, you learn all about it. So, it's much better.

Auburn: How does it make you feel when they take –

Moira: Mad! 'Cause you've gotta learn about it, or you won't know anything about each other and stuff. Or about your own body, even. They need to put them in there!

The indignation Moira and other girls expressed at the lack of education about the female body indicates that the girls were learning, through Women's Studies, that they could, and in fact should, expect more from their regular school curricula.

Girls came to recognize the taboo surrounding young women's bodies (unless these bodies are presented as sexualized) as very problematic; they realized feeling shame about their bodies was a form of oppression, and began to feel proud of their bodies:

Wanda: I think I'm more confident now [that I've taken Women's Studies]. 'Cause I know who I am, now, like before you didn't really understand what was going on – like, with your body and stuff too. But now it's like, “Yeah! I'm a woman!”

In addition to embracing their bodies, girls were freed from shame related to public unease around natural female biological processes such as menstruation and pregnancy.

Violence Against Women

Another topic that arose repeatedly during interviews was that of sexual assault and violence against women. Learning about rape was difficult for many girls, but an important topic to include. Students came to recognize the complexity surrounding sexual assault: Where adolescent rape victims are frequently blamed for their own experience of assault, students in Women's Studies learned to take a critical look at the dynamics present. Guest speaker Marsha, who had been raped herself, pointed out to the girls that, regardless of a woman's status or sexual reputation, no one deserves to be sexually assaulted:

[At a party] there was this girl who passed out. And a whole bunch of different guys had sex with her while she was passed out. And Brenda [Mrs. Brown] talks about it a little bit when I'm doing my presentation, and it's like, don't you guys think, if that happened at a party you were at, what would you do – whether you disliked that girl or whatever, isn't that something that maybe you think you should try to stop?

Marsha further problematized judging each other based on sexual reputation by pointing out her own reaction to her rape:

One of the things I talk about is how after it happened I became very promiscuous, and I say things to the girls, like you know, not to judge other girls, because maybe that's what they're going through. Maybe they're having a hard time with their sexuality and things like that.

Marsha's point about her promiscuity being related to her experience of rape alludes to the complex consequences of rape (such as trauma), opening students' eyes to the fact that quick judgment of others' behaviour is never well-informed or accurate.¹⁰

Girls also learned of ways they might protect themselves from sexual assault, while being reminded that if they were unable to fight off or prevent a rape, they were still not responsible for the attack upon their bodies:

Bree-Anne: We learned how to defend ourselves and how it's not your fault if something happens to us. She emphasized that quite a bit, that it's not your fault, and you can tell someone.

Traci: Marsha, who came in and spoke about herself being raped, it definitely proved that you could go and talk to her, and/or Mrs. Brown if something like that were to happen. Like, there's other people who have gone through it, you're not alone, you're allowed to talk to them.

Girls understood both that they could do things to protect themselves, but also that if they were not successful, they could rightfully and unashamedly seek support. Rejecting personal blame for others' attacks upon oneself indicates increased self-worth.

Women in the Media

Another important topic that girls remembered clearly was women in the media.

When I asked if what they learned in Women's Studies continued to affect how they thought about the world, girls most often mentioned maintaining a critical view of the

¹⁰ Unfortunately, her words also hint that, if there is no underlying cause, promiscuity is inherently bad, which is a problematic assumption.

representation of women in the media:

Traci: Yeah the stuff for the media is good too 'cause like when you're actually watching TV, I think about it now, looking back at some of the media messages, just some of the TV shows, ads put out, it's like, "that's a put-down." You notice it now. Whereas before it was kind of like, "Oh, it's normal." But it's not, it shouldn't be normal.

Bree-Anne: Before I thought everything was all fine and happy, but when you actually look at things now, it's just like – totally changes your mind – it's like, that's wrong, and that's wrong, and that's degrading against women. It's like, we're still underestimated as women, I find, even still today.

Carly: I still think about it a lot, like watching TV and stuff, I'm kinda like, "holy crap."

Women's Studies also opened the girls' eyes to sexism closer to home, coming from friends, family, and other community members. Traci pointed out that Women's Studies had changed how she responded to verbal attacks: "Before I would have shrugged off sexist comments. I'm more aware."

Girls used words like "smart" and "enlightened" when asked how it felt to possess the information they acquired during the class. While being aware can be difficult, girls nevertheless appreciated their new knowledge:

Anna (Survey respondent): To say that I enjoyed it would be a bit strange, since some of the things that we learned about were disturbing. I guess I would say that it impacted me heavily. A lot of it made me mad, but I was very glad to have taken it. I feel that it has made me a better and more awake person.

Angela: It totally opens your eyes.

Traci: I'm glad that I notice it versus being uninformed.

Perhaps it was partially due to their newly acquired knowledge and critical awareness that girls reported feeling more confident after taking Women's Studies.

New Confidence and Girl Empowerment

Though it varied from feeling a bit more sure of themselves to having an entire morale boost, all girls reported feeling more confident and/or empowered after taking Mrs. Brown's Women's Studies course. They now know their rights, recognize oppression working in their own and others' lives, and feel more comfortable speaking up and resisting gender norms. Girls felt proud to be female while taking (and after finishing) Women's Studies. More than just appreciating the biological wonders of their bodies, girls felt connected to the history of the women's liberation movement and the struggles faced by their "sisters" past and present:

Dallas (Survey respondent): I can say that I love being a woman so much more knowing that there were strong women before and that there will continue to be strong women in the future.

Moira: I felt better about my gender and, yeah, more empowered.

These quotes demonstrate that feeling connected to one's gender and to other women dealing (or who have dealt) with a struggle for women's equality was a moving and empowering experience for girls: they recognize that they are not alone.

Girls' confidence also benefited from critical awareness they gained regarding media pressure and societal expectations about women's appearance. Girls began to reject the idea that they should concern themselves with looking beautiful and feel badly about their "imperfect" bodies:

Traci: Like, music videos and stuff, you're like, "Oh, that's how I'm supposed to look, that's how a woman is supposed to look."

Bree-Anne: Even like, advertisements and stuff too, it's like, "Oh." You have to be thin, you have to be pretty.

Traci: And now it's like, "No you don't!"

Bree-Anne: And why would I care what other people, and like the media

think about you? Like, be who you want to be!

Angela detailed similar thoughts, and demonstrated how her change in attitude was a sign of managing to slough off self-oppression:

Angela: I'm way more confident after taking that class. Before I know, I was, kind of really hard on myself and I had really low self-esteem and maybe that's why I didn't talk very much. And I find now that I do open up a lot more and I can walk through the school hall not thinking that everyone is staring at me thinking I'm ugly or something, you know? 'Cause it did instill a lot of confidence in each one of us. Because we realized we don't have to feel the way that we are – media is preying on us as one thing, but we don't have to be that way, you know?

Not only did the very shy Angela stop self-judging, she also felt able to voice her opinion more frequently.

Finding a voice was a major sign of increased confidence in girls. Mrs. Brown talked about the continued need for young women to feel comfortable speaking up, noting that just as in decades past, the girls today continue to hesitate to voice their opinions:

Mrs. Brown: Self-esteem, watching girls get a voice, that was my big thing. Some of them are so silenced. For heavens' sakes! Speak up. You know, guys sitting there saying the most disgusting things, and you know, you don't have to take that. And they're still very, very silent. They're, they're supposed to be this new aggressive age, and “These girls are way more like boys” – and I'm like, I don't know, there's still a lot of demeaning – I don't know. It's still tough being a girl in high school, for sure.

Girls who attended Women's Studies classes with Mrs. Brown took her words to heart, speaking up in class and at home, excelling at presentations, and simply feeling as though their opinions were worth voicing:

Dee: I guess I wasn't that confident when I was doing presentations, and then in Women's Studies I was, and now, I find I am more, like, with everybody.

Angela: I know my grandpa, I will get in yelling fights with him over it, because he just thinks that women, our place is in the home. They are supposed to clean and cook and guys are supposed to be the providers,

they're supposed to work and girls aren't. All this stuff, and he got mad at me when I cut my hair short because he thinks girls' hair should be long and stuff. It's really bad from my grandpa. So like, I told him, like, I'll prove him wrong and stuff, because women are a big contributor to society and he just doesn't see it.

Girls demonstrated that, after taking Women's Studies, they were empowered to speak up in other areas of their lives.

Part of the reason girls found their voice outside of class was the encouragement and support they received for doing so within the class:

Rachael: I really liked just the idea that I can walk in there and I can say, like put up my hand and say anything, voice any opinion, and I would never be told that was wrong. I'd be told, "I don't agree with that, here's another way of looking at it," but never "That's wrong." Which was, it was nice.

Nandita (Survey Respondent): You had more of a voice in Woman Studies than in any other class. I felt more comfortable explaining why I felt the way I did about certain topics and it made me become more interested in politics.

When girls were permitted to express opinions in class and felt respected no matter their stance on a topic, they developed confidence to speak up in Women's Studies. This confidence often spread beyond the safety of the classroom walls.

Girls' new confidence and interest in women's issues were sometimes met with resistance. Girls nevertheless held fast to their beliefs and stood up for themselves:

Becky: When that class ended, I realized how important it was to me, 'cause I learned lots of new things, and you gotta be confident and you gotta stick up for yourself, not just, like if someone's being rude to you or sexist, you can't just like walk away from it, 'cause then they'll be, like, keep coming back to you and back to you. Yeah.

Angela: I remember there was this new girl and the guys were making fun of her and throwing stuff at her that she actually cried, and she left the room. And I got so mad at them, I'm not really one to like, stand up and like, yell at people, but I did and they stopped. But I felt so bad for her.

As can be seen in Angela's story, girls developed both an ability to stand up against

injustice, and an empathy for other girls suffering from it, which resulted in girls trying to empower (instead of compete against) their female peers:

Janelle: I don't know, when I see someone, like, there was a guy and he was calling a girl down and stuff, I usually say something now, whereas before I wouldn't. I wouldn't really say something, I'd be like, "Oh, she can stand up for herself." But now it's, I'll say something, try and give her confidence.

Understanding the wide impacts of sexist oppression, girls saw importance not only in feeling confident themselves, but also in empowering others.

Angela articulated her recognition of the important link between feeling capable of changing "the whole entire world," and using that capacity to help others achieve the same level of confidence:

Angela: I think she [Mrs. Brown] helped a lot though, for a lot of us to like, prove to us ... that we can change the whole entire world. Like, before, I'd never even think about what's goin' on, what's happening to that girl next door? Or whatever. And now, you think about it all the time. 'Cause when I see little girls, I want to go out to the street and tell them what's going on!

Angela, along with several other participants, felt the class message was so important that it should be shared with other women, particularly those younger than them.

In some ways, girls were empowered to stand up and speak out because they developed a great deal of self-respect while in Women's Studies. Whether they vocalized their feelings or not, the Women's Studies students I talked to felt better about themselves on the inside and valued their own happiness over impressing others:

Jodi: [Women's Studies] was like a wakeup call. It's like, whatever, I don't care what people think of me, I'm going to live my life.

Bree-Anne: You just feel better about yourself, who you are and what you look like, and you don't care anymore, you are who you are and you're happy with that, and that's the most important thing.

Angela saw an even bigger picture, noting that empowered women contribute to a healthy

community:

It's sad that they [women who try to fit the mold] don't want to be an individual and be different and be, like – yourself. 'Cause I'm sure that you could do way better in society if you were yourself, and showing other people that you don't have to be what everyone thinks you should be.

Instead of spending their energies trying to conform, girls began to embrace their individuality after taking Women's Studies.

The idea that girls should be able to be themselves was accompanied by the notion that girls should be permitted to do whatever they want with their lives and careers. Guest speakers, in particular, inspired girls to follow their dreams:

Jodi: She'd come in and tell us, she's so independent and she makes a lot of money and stuff and she works in construction, so she was like “You know what, you can do whatever you want to do.” A lot of guest speakers told us that.

Maria: Just giving me the feeling of being in control of myself. I think that's how, I think that's probably – how she'd tell you, “you can do this as a woman, you can do that as a woman, don't let anyone ever tell you that you can't.” Just like, I'm hearing it from another woman's perspective too, she's like “Right on!” Knowing that I can do whatever I need to do in life, and I can still do it as a woman.

Guest speakers from diverse backgrounds brought a variety of perspectives into the class, showing girls that they had limitless options available to them. At the same time, guest speakers themselves were sometimes empowered by their visits to the class. While girls did not comment on this phenomenon much, Mrs. Brown talked about the importance of women telling their stories – not just so the girls could hear, but also so the women could be heard. Many women, she said, underestimated the importance of their stories:

I end up spending a lot of time telling my guest speakers “You did fine! They loved you! You did fine.” ... [they seem to think] their story isn't important. So I'm like “No! It's important!”

More than just coming to understand the value of their experiences, guest speakers sometimes found that sharing their stories was therapeutic. Marsha, who tells students about being raped when she was younger, noted the personal significance of opening up, saying “It's a very powerful thing for me in getting over it also, is to talk about it.” Girls were genuinely impacted by the guest speakers and guest speakers, in turn, were touched by the interest the girls took in their stories.

As noted in Chapter Four, the course has reached farther than the walls of Mrs. Brown's classroom. Guest speakers come from the community to tell their stories and interact with the class, girls gain confidence and learn to more greatly value themselves and their opinions, and as they speak up, their voices are heard throughout the community. Over the years, the Women's Studies course has come to impact a great number of people and how they view the world and live their lives.

Change in Current Lifestyle and Anticipating the Future

Irene very nicely summed up the long term effects of the course in her survey comment: “I haven't been in school in four years but I still remember the class and live day by day with the things I learned.” In learning about issues relevant to women, girls gained practical knowledge and skills that they can put to use in their own lives. Having increased awareness about gender inequality prepares the girls to deal with oppressive situations. For example, Maria talked about how she felt empowered to stand up to a sexist atmosphere at her place of work, where she tended bar:

I went into the course 'cause I found out it was empowering. It's given me confidence in certain places, like, probably if I was still a shy little girl, when I was getting training [at work] and the girls were like, “If a guy says 'Hey baby' to you, be okay with it,” I probably would have been like, “Oh, okay.”

But now I know you can totally be just like “Hell no!” And they have to respect that.

Maria felt she had learned important information about her right to be treated with respect in the work place, and was able to refuse objectification from male patrons.

On the other hand, being aware of violence against women had the potential to scare girls, though they did not see it that way. Rather, they had always known fear, and continued to, but felt more capable of eluding danger because of strategies they learned:

Bree-Anne: I hate walking at night, I hate it. Oh, I hate it. I hate being alone. Like, especially with like, older guys.

Angela: And it's kind of horrible that women have to be scared to walk by themselves.

Auburn: Are you more scared after the class and learning about that stuff?

Angela: No, not really.

Bree-Anne: I was way more scared before.

Angela: I was more scared too. I was like, I couldn't even like, go outside, really, from my house when it was dark, because I was scared. After dark I would stay in my house.

Bree-Anne: I still do that. But I call people when I walk, just in case, and I stay on the phone. I call my mom. That's what I usually, like I usually call my mom. One time I called you [Angela], I was like “I have to talk to you, 'cause I'm walking home.”

Thus, girls did not learn to be afraid from Women's Studies. As young as 16, female students already had a strong understanding that the world was not safe for them, especially after dark. While the Women's Studies class affirmed that women do face danger, it also gave them a few strategies to discourage an attacker from making a move. In addition to having someone on the line while you walk, girls mentioned holding their keys strategically to enhance a defensive punch if needed, carrying pepper spray, walking with a friend, and a few physical defensive moves to enhance their safety. Further, it is possible that the increased self-assuredness that many of the girls reported having gained through the class would decrease their chances of being attacked simply because they

carried themselves with more confidence.

Another lifestyle change that participants mentioned was their choice in feminine hygiene products. Mrs. Brown contacted carriers of alternative menstrual products and gave the girls samples while educating them about different options available. Many participants reported switching to cloth pads in the interest of better health (avoiding the chemicals in tampons) and protecting the environment (reducing waste by using reusable products). Prior to Women's Studies, girls said this option was fairly invisible.

Re-envisioning The Future

In addition to improving their current day-to-day lifestyle, girls told me how what they learned in Women's Studies had changed some of their life plans. Some had new career goals based on women they met and things they learned in the class. Girls reported feeling confident enough to fulfill a lifelong dream to travel after meeting a young woman who had traveled the world, using the substantial wages she earned while working in a traditionally male-dominated field.

Angela got me very engaged one day when she told me how she had chosen her future career based on what she learned in Women's Studies. This interview excerpt also gives an example of me being completely transparent with the participant, as I was obviously delighted with what she had to say:

Auburn: Did your participation affect how you think about the world?

Angela: Greatly, yeah. It made me realize what I wanted to be for the rest of my life.

Auburn: Wow. What's that?

Angela: I want to be a Women's Studies professor.

Auburn: Fantastic! Good for you. And why is that?

Angela: Because I want to help as many people as I can, and if I can teach other people about what's happening in the world, maybe they can make a

difference too.

Being exposed to Women's Studies enabled Angela to recognize a new career option.

Rachael also explained feeling able to go on to do something wonderful with her life, whatever she might choose that to be:

Rachael: Especially coming from Vista View, you just get lost in the littleness of it and the idea that I can go from here and do that, it's just like, "Wow."

Girls learned in class that their futures held the potential for them to pursue dreams that may have seemed out of reach before. Not only did they feel empowered to take on exciting challenges, but in some cases, learned of unusual opportunities for the first time.

A most poignant comment came from survey respondent Fawn who improved her chances of a happy future by getting out of a bad situation. This powerful quote truly speaks to the potential impact high school Women's Studies has in liberating girls from serious oppressive forces – including violence:

Fawn (Survey Respondent): By having a safe place to learn, I was able to gain the confidence to eventually report my abusive boyfriend and take my case to trial, the support of my peers and Mrs. Brown allowed me to be open to changing my situation. The class also allowed me to learn what makes a good relationship, whether romantic or platonic.

In essence, girls were empowered to take care of themselves and their needs, be it by finding and pursuing a dream, protecting themselves from a dangerous situation, or making healthier choices in their day-to-day lives. In learning of their own worth and capacity, girls were enabled to live more fulfilling lives.

Increased Availability of Women's Studies Courses

Perhaps the best indicator that the class was successful and well received was that all participants thought that the class was so important, it should be more widely

available. Although none of my questions actually asked whether they thought the course should be offered more, each and every interviewee independently indicated that the course should be widely available – some focused on increasing its availability within Vista View High, while others thought further afield.

Some girls indicated that the course should be offered more frequently in their own school. Several suggested that multiple grades of the course should be available, and that it should be offered every year at the very least:

Traci: I think a lot of girls in grade nine, even the younger grades should take it.

Jodi: [When I see young girls feeling dis-empowered I think] “you need to take Women's Studies!”

Auburn: Have you ever told girls that?

Jodi: Well we do but it's like, “When are we supposed to go?” 'Cause it's not every year, right.

Becky: It's every second year I think.

Wanda: Yeah. Which sucks, it should be every year.

Becky: Yeah, 'cause I want to go this year so bad.

Jodi: Me too!

Becky: I wanted to come back last year.

Jodi: I'm so coming back next year too. Just to sit in there.

Becky: I'll come in as a guest speaker!

Girls so enjoyed and valued the class that they wished they could return, even if not for credit.

Many girls expressed surprise and dismay that Women's Studies is not more widely offered in other high schools. Having personally witnessed how empowering the class could be, they thought it should be available to all girls:

Wanda: I think every school should have the opportunity that we do with Women's Studies, it would boost everybody up.

Rachael: It was an amazing program. It's sad that more girls don't get to experience that.

Roxanne: I just think it's a good class and more schools should have it for girls.

These girls felt that more girls should have access to what they considered to be an exceptionally important class.

Participants also thought boys should have the opportunity to take the class. Many mentioned how great it would be if boys were able to understand things from their point of view, and appreciate the struggle for equality women have gone through and continue to go through:

Tanya: I think more guys should take the class. I think that they need to, 'cause right now a lot of guys in school are like "oh that's a sexist class, you sit there and you dis men." No we don't! That's not at all what we do, we learn about our history, what women have done and what we've accomplished because we've accomplished great things, and I think if guys took the class, they would understand that.

Dee: I liked having the class all girls but I'd like everyone to learn about it, like even the guys.

Traci: I think it should be mandatory to graduate with Women's Studies!

Bree-Anne: I'd love the guys to see it through our point of view.

Janelle thought that it would be good for boys to take the class, but recognized that there was resistance to the label:

Auburn: Do you think guys should take it too?

Janelle: I think it would help a lot, make them realize. Show them that they can't treat girls the way they do and keep going like that. I don't know, it hurts the girls I guess. A lot of the guys won't take it, 'cause they're like, "Oh it's Women's Studies, not going to take it."

Interview participants appreciated the all-female atmosphere that was present in their class. Nevertheless, they saw the value of boys receiving the same education. Girls also recognized that, given its focus on women's issues, few boys would be willing to take it.

Though I did not bring up offering Women's Studies more frequently and in more

high schools, I did ask participants if they would be interested in attending an extra-curricular type of women's studies; perhaps in the form of an after school discussion group. Several responded positively:

Auburn: If there was a more extracurricular WS, would you go to that?

Bree-Anne: Oh definitely.

Angela: Definitely. I wouldn't even hesitate, yeah.

However, others recognized that the time commitment was substantial and, while they would like to attend and fully participate, knew they may be less likely to if it was not required:

Moira: I think it was not a school function thing, it would have been the same. But maybe this was better because I was getting graded on it, so I actually like, read the stuff, and did it.

On the other hand, Mrs. Brown had interesting ideas about how keeping Women's Studies within the education system (particularly universities) limited access to the information:

Mrs. Brown: I think I have a little bit of resentment towards the whole idea that Women's Studies is an academic course. It's supposed to be for women, about women, for women, so why aren't women being able to access it? Because I decide I'm going into a trade school, I can't take Women's Studies? Does that make sense to you? I'm going to be a hair dresser so I can't take Women's Studies? I'm going to be a wife and mother so I can't take Women's Studies? Why is it exclusively only for a select few women?

Later, she elaborated on how important it was that all students, regardless of their academic achievement or gender, should have access to the course:

When I first started teaching it at high school, I thought "Oh it should only be for the academic students because some of the material is so hard." But it's the students that aren't academic, it's the students that are like, that have like, some real life experiences that are, like, you know, when you start talking about sexual harassment, they go, "Well I know what that is, you should see what my boss said last night." They know what I'm talking about. Life experience, right. It shouldn't be a subject that excludes anyone. I've had boys in there and they totally get it too, and quite enjoy it, the discussions and the guest speakers and everything.

Overall, students and Mrs. Brown indicated that an extra-curricular form of Women's Studies would be beneficial. However, some students recognized that it may be difficult to meet the time commitments involved.

The benefits of the Women's Studies class, listed by both students and involved adults, are diverse. Girls gained new knowledge, developed increased confidence, and became more critically aware. They spoke highly of the class on multiple levels, feeling intellectually and emotionally empowered, and enjoying a healthy connection with other girls and women. Participants so valued the course that they suggested its increased availability both in their own school and in other areas. The course was a refreshing change from other classes which can feel oppressive (Crabtree & Sapp, 2003). This chapter has given a clear answer to my research question, proving that Women's Studies increased participants internal protective factors by empowering girls with increased confidence, new, relevant knowledge and a desire for more knowledge, motivation, and resiliency in the face of oppression. However, despite the many advantages to the course, there are drawbacks, discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter Seven: Course Challenges

Difficulty in Women Specific Course Offerings

Interview participants were overwhelmingly in favour of the Women's Studies course. The previous chapter outlines ways they benefited from the class and what they appreciated most about it. While those narratives flowed relatively easily, girls had to think hard to come up with possible improvements to the course. Further, they rarely mentioned negative aspects of the class without repeated probing from me.

Though I, too, was more excited about the positive aspects of the class, one goal from the start was to see where the course might be improved. With some probing, and usually only after a strong rapport had been established, girls shared their reservations about the class. I believe there were two main reasons why negative feedback was so much harder to find. First, the course was held in girls' high esteem, and they truly appreciated what they had gained from the class. Second, they knew the course had been under administrative threat, and needed to be sure that I was there in an appreciative inquiry. I tried to make it clear that I was not there to get their favourite class axed. Girls described a degrading tone being used by their principal and a few male teachers when it came to the Women's Studies course; I observed the same myself while conversing with the principal and a male teacher. This derogatory approach from male staff underscores the relevancy of the course in girls' lives.

This chapter first discusses vulnerability, where I describe the ways in which girls were opened up to vulnerability through the sharing, open atmosphere in the class. Next, the impact of discussing difficult topics is considered. Finally, I detail specific

improvements girls suggested for future offerings of the course.

Vulnerability of Students

One of the most important positive aspects of the class was also a drawback. The trust that enabled the girls to share and learn in a personal manner facilitated learning and retention of information, but also created vulnerability and the potential for broken trust. Although this lack of confidentiality was occasionally a problem in the class, most girls spoke about how successful the class was at keeping the trust.

Feeling Safety in Sharing

Girls noted that maintaining privacy and respect were very important aspects both during and after class, and that those guidelines were taken very seriously by all the students in the class. Here, Bree-Anne and Angela talk at length about the significance of a “pact” they had to keep things between themselves, and about the success of that pact:

Auburn: When it's open like that and you can say whatever you want, do you think that ended up making some people more vulnerable 'cause they opened up too much?

Angela: It might have, but I find if in the classroom, they opened up, no one would judge them for it. And we wouldn't bring it outside of the classroom. We had this pact, where it would stay in the classroom.

Bree-Anne: We had this trust thing, too, like nothing leaves this room, what happens in here, stays in here.

Angela: And we all felt that way, because we all opened up pretty much. Maybe some of us more than others, but we still opened up.

Bree-Anne: It was expected to stay between us, and not to leave at all, not anybody's mouths, except for in THAT class.

Angela: And even some visitors didn't want people to know what they were talking about, so we wouldn't talk to anybody outside of the class about it. It was just this trust thing where we just valued each other and we wouldn't go and talk about it.

Auburn: And that rang true?

Angela: It did. I found it did.

Bree-Anne: I found it did, I haven't heard anything otherwise about it.

Angela: The stuff we heard in there about other people, I haven't heard

ANYONE talk about it.
Bree-Anne: Me either.
Angela: It's pretty cool.

It is clear that the girls recognized this occurrence as something special: Angela notes “It's pretty cool” that it all worked out, with secrets kept and respect maintained. Other girls also remarked on this phenomenon:

Moira: We kept everything to ourselves, that happened in class. We didn't go around sharing it, 'cause we knew that would be wrong.

Roxanne: I don't think anyone would have told anyone [about a personal issue someone shared in class]. I know I never told anyone, that was the first time I said it out loud, was just now.

Girls expressed that, generally, confidentiality was maintained and the class benefited from the openness and sharing seen in their Women's Studies class.

Dealing with a Lack of Confidentiality

Some participants, however, recognized a different side of the story, where occasionally confidentiality was not maintained, and what was shared during Women's Studies classes opened students up to potential exposure that they did not face in other classes:

Tanya: It was a very open environment in the Women's Studies class, so we were all very open, it was all things that we talked about and stuff that you wouldn't say in another classroom, but there was people in there who – of course – made it negative, and kind of took it away from everyone else. But in other classes, it's dealt with differently too, because in other classes, there isn't that confidentiality, there isn't that open sharing. So it's not as big of an issue where it is in Women's Studies. Because you're talking about personal things and talking about opinions on how you feel.

Tanya has aptly expressed the downside of trust: the potential for the breaking of such. In opening up to their classmates, girls also opened themselves to possible judgment for their opinions or behaviour among their Women's Studies classmates, and, if word were

to get out, the wider school community. Tanya points out that other classes did not encourage such sharing, and thus did not open the door to vulnerability. Thus, in a way, Women's Studies could facilitate the judgment of girls by their peers.

Exercising Caution when Sharing

Interestingly, girls understood this danger, and despite speaking highly of the sharing and trust present in class, Angela and Bree-Anne nevertheless indicated they exercised caution when it came to sharing personal stories:

Angela: I didn't really open up that much 'cause I'm not really one to open up 'cause I am really shy. But I'm sure a lot of people did.

Bree-Anne: I didn't open up to the class, I would tell Mrs. Brown stuff, but I wouldn't want to tell the whole class.

In fact, carefully choosing which stories to share and which to keep to themselves was a very common strategy girls employed to protect themselves from a potential breach of confidentiality. During a focus group, Becky, Wanda, and Jodi agreed that they kept stories fairly impersonal:

Auburn: So did any of you personally feel vulnerable, yourselves, for something you had said in class?

Becky: I don't think so.

Wanda: No.

Jodi: [shakes head]

Wanda: I don't think I went too personal.

Becky: Yeah.

Jodi: I never do.

Other girls also expressed that they tended not to share things that might become damaging later.

Instructor Enforcement of Confidentiality

Tanya and Maria suggested that the breaking of trust and confidentiality was not a sign that the sharing should be discouraged or eliminated, but rather that Mrs. Brown

needed to take a strong stance and make it very clear that what was shared in class was to be held in confidence. They indicated that she should perhaps take sanctions against those who did not adhere to this principle. While Mrs. Brown did speak to the girls about confidentiality, Tanya and Maria found that this was not always adequate:

Auburn: And did Mrs. Brown know about this lack of confidentiality?

Maria: She was a little bit oblivious for a bit.

Tanya: When she did notice, she did talk to them. She told them, she did bring up the confidentiality thing many times, 'cause they were talking about it in the hallway with other people.

Maria: 'Cause we had a guest speaker, she came in, she talked about a really big deal that even her own mom doesn't even know about it, you know, she had a few of us in tears, and –

Tanya: These girls told people in the hallway! And I was like, “You can't do that! If you want anyone to ever come back to this class, you can't do that!”

Mrs. Brown did her best to ensure that students in the class respected one another, and tried to keep the peace between them. However, Maria's use of the phrase “a little bit oblivious” highlights a perceived lacking in Mrs. Brown's understanding of what happened outside of class. I asked Mrs. Brown herself about the issue of broken trust:

Auburn: How do you get them to respect that confidentiality?

Mrs. Brown: I just ask them to. That's just – they're okay with that.

Auburn: 'Cause [a guest speaker] said at first she was really worried that it would be all over the school.

Mrs. Brown: Yeah, nope. I think people underestimate them. ...They don't mind being taken into confidence. They don't mind being trusted. They're quite up for that, actually! They're not – like a lot of them are close to 18 years old. Plus a lot of them have similar-type confidences, right?

It appears that, in this instance, Mrs. Brown believed the girls were capable of acting like adults; for the most part, she was right. However, tensions between students, while generally kept at bay in class, could nevertheless find fuel through class interactions. Tanya, who perhaps suffered most from a lack of confidentiality when something she shared in class ended up as another person's facebook status, argued that students who did

not respect the confidences of others should be kicked out of the class, and that Mrs. Brown should keep attendance in such a special class atmosphere as a “privilege.”

Mrs. Brown was not as oblivious as the girls might have thought, however; she recognized that the year that I studied had seen more controversy and breaking of confidence than she had seen in previous years:

Auburn: How do you deal with confrontation in the class, when girls fight and stuff?

Mrs. Brown: I just don't have a whole lot. Yeah. Probably more in a regular English class than a Women's Studies class. Last time I taught it would be the exception.

This was the first time, in fifteen years of teaching the class, that multiple issues arose; perhaps this is why Mrs. Brown was judged to be “a little bit oblivious” to the initial lack of confidentiality. At the same time, however, she realized that this was a larger than usual group of girls, and establishing a sense of intimacy and warmth was more difficult in this situation. When I mentioned that some of the girls chose to share individually rather than to the group, she noted the class size and the challenge in developing a sense of intimacy:

Auburn: Some of them kind of alluded to that they spill their guts more in the [journal] binders than they do in class, which makes sense.

Mrs. Brown: Yeah, 'cause it was a big class last time. Sometimes it's really small and really intimate, and they'll actually share stuff they've written down and stuff. But with such a big class it's hard to do that, get that sense of intimacy going.

It is impossible to assess or compare the different levels of intimacy in years past, as narratives were only gathered for the last year. Mrs. Brown's comments on the situation are a valuable description, but as a teacher it is impossible for her to depict, with precise accuracy, what her students thought. However, survey responses were consistent with Mrs. Brown's assertions. Further, with 25 students, the Women's Studies class studied was

indeed larger than previous years, which could have significantly changed the class dynamic. Thus, it does seem likely that, indeed, this year had more breaches of trust than in the past.

Taking Blame and Responsibility

Sometimes the victims of broken trust were seen as responsible because they did not exercise the caution that other girls, such as those quoted above, did. In particular, Traci thought that some girls foolishly over-shared with the class, and thus ended up dealing with the consequences:¹¹

Oh yeah, she said she had [a particular illness] ... But I don't know if it's true though. Plus she has a reputation for lying about stuff like that. I wouldn't have said that to the class. Especially because the diagnosis was never clear.

At another moment, she spoke about it being difficult to be kind to people who are cruel to you or others. It was apparent that the “sisterhood” Traci talked so fondly of could only go so far:

Auburn: I'm wondering if there's a few black sheep in the school who kind of don't get that support from the other girls.

Traci: Yeah. There's some girls who kind of – they put it on themselves though, they're kind of rude to the other girls. I don't know why, maybe they have crappy relationships with the females in their family. I don't know why they're like that, but like, it feels like when you're trying to talk to some of those people, then they just get really defensive and it feels like they hate you. Yeah, it's hard to be nice to someone like that sometimes.

Angela also mentioned how, with certain girls, it was just harder to get along and be nice:

Angela: She was in Women's Studies with us, and I remember, we would shake our heads every time she'd talk. I remember doing that too, and I feel bad about it now. She doesn't like bring it on herself, per se, but she is, like different and stuff. But [trails off].

¹¹ I found myself resistant to Traci's ideas. Although I did not verbalize these thoughts, I noticed myself thinking perhaps she was unable to recognize her own popularity and intellectual privileges, and chose to blame others for their own so-called downfall.

Angela and Traci both struggle to explain why certain girls are repeatedly targeted, but note that, to some extent, something about the girls themselves is difficult or different enough to bring about hostilities from classmates. They were outsiders. This dynamic was not isolated to the Women's Studies classroom; as discussed in Chapter Four, the consistent, repeated bullying towards a couple of the girls I interviewed was a school-wide occurrence. However, being in Women's Studies in some ways facilitated new types of bullying that were tied to the open and sharing atmosphere which allowed students to acquire personal information about each other.

Class Disagreements

It was not just the “regular” bullying victims who felt the heat in the Women's Studies class; in fact, a few girls, who were typically not targeted, mentioned instances that were quite antagonistic. Again, these antagonisms were caused by the sharing atmosphere present in class. Becky, in particular, faced harsh sanctions in one such situation:

Becky: Oh we had so many arguments about that [abortion] in that class. And Mrs. Brown asked me if I would get one or not and I said yes, and – oh my god – [a classmate] flipped! She was like “Why would you do that to your baby!?” I was sittin' there, like, “Oh my god, I shouldn't have said anything!” [laughs].

Auburn: So would that have been one moment where you did feel kind of vulnerable?

Becky: Yeah! “I'm sorry! I take it back!” And then [another girl] was like “I wouldn't do that! You're killing a human being!”

Auburn: So Mrs. Brown outright asked you, or the whole class?

Becky: Well, 'cause I was talking about it, and she asked me if I would or not, and like, I should have just shut up, been like “I'm not gonna answer that!”

Becky was put on the spot in this instance, asked to share her opinion about an extremely controversial topic. Upon doing so, she received vitriolic chastising from some of her

offended classmates. Both a topic and a question that would be unlikely to arise in another high school class, Becky faced this uncomfortable situation because of her participation in Women's Studies.

After her own unfortunate experience in sharing her views regarding reproductive choice, Becky noted that other students could also be targeted for their opinions:

Becky: There was this one girl who would always like, if someone said something that she didn't agree with, she'd blurt out "No, I don't agree with that! That's wrong!"

Occasionally, differing opinions – which naturally were rampant in a class covering so many multi-sided topics – led to tenseness in a class that was otherwise valued for its comfortable atmosphere. Butin's (2002) caution that anti-oppressive education has the potential to silence others rings true here. More discussion of the benefits and drawbacks of anti-oppressive education is included in Chapter Eight.

In a class where controversial and personal topics are discussed with passion, there is no doubt that disagreements will arise. As demonstrated above, this was fairly common in the Women's Studies class, and for the most part, girls gave their opinions and discussed different ways of looking at an issue in a fairly respectful manner.

Disagreements are not necessarily drawbacks in feminist interaction, as they can lead to important moments of growth and consciousness raising. Most participants indicated that the class engaged in healthy discussion:

Auburn: What happened when girls disagreed in class?

Moira: There'd be a huge argument, from who agreed to who disagreed, and stuff, and then we'd all talk it out. So that was – it was ok, like if someone disagreed, we wouldn't get in huge fights, we'd talk about it and stuff. So it wasn't bad.

However, this ideal was not always met, and some opinions were not tolerated when

students had steadfast views on issues that were highly important to them. If, on these less negotiable topics, there was a disagreement, the majority could stifle the opposition:

Tanya: I think another thing that needs to be regulated in the Women's Studies is, yes, everyone has a right to their opinion, but it got to the point where if a girl was saying her opinion, other girls would shut her down. And I don't think that's right either.

Despite efforts to keep the class equitable and make sure each person had a turn to speak, some students ended up being silenced. Although Tanya pointed out and problematized this oppression happening in class, she nevertheless understood the value of class conversations, as well as the value of dissent:

Tanya: I think you're always going to have disagreements.

Auburn: Oh of course.

Tanya: Because no two people are going to have the same opinions. But that doesn't mean that you shouldn't teach it or talk about it. 'Cause everyone has their own ideas and opinions anyways.

Tanya understood that disagreements were a healthy part of learning, and could facilitate rich discussion. She also noted that mutual respect was necessary for such conversations to be fruitful, and that occasionally this was missing in Vista View Women's Studies.

Overall Vulnerability in Women's Studies

Generally, students respected one another despite their differences in opinion. However, on occasion, girls were “shut down” when they expressed a controversial opinion. This is akin to the silencing of minority opinions in wider societal politics. In some ways, this could have been good education for the girls: learning that sticking to your guns is not always easy, and that you may be targeted for your beliefs. Alternatively, shutting down a conversation rather than allowing thoughts to be verbalized, justified, and understood prevents new learning. Further, immediate disagreement, accompanied by a

lack of respect for another's opinions, can lead to arguments rather than productive conversations. In addition to not facilitating useful debate, arguments can also lead to insults, unfair accusations, and personal attacks.

In various ways, girls were made vulnerable to their classmates because of the class. Confiding damaging secrets and sharing controversial opinions could lead to a targeting of girls. By being in a somewhat safe atmosphere, girls were given a sense of security. However, that security did not always provide enough protection: When they opened up to each other, sharing personal stories, those stories could be shared with the wider school population to humiliate each other; when they discussed controversial topics and expressed sometimes unpopular opinions on such, they could face sanctions from classmates for holding such opinions. However, for the most part, this was not a problem. Rather, girls truly did express an increased comfort level in class, as well as enjoyment in having the opportunity to learn while staying personally connected to the material.

Difficult Women's Studies Topics

Perhaps a necessary evil, difficult topics were, in some ways, the true core of the Women's Studies class. Upsetting topics, controversial topics, sad stories, a difficult history – these occur frequently in the study of women (Rogers & Garrett, 2002; Putnam et al, 1995). While the class also learned about accomplishments of the women's rights movement, the first women to do various jobs, and how every-day women from their community accomplish wonderful tasks on a regular basis, much of what the course focused on was negative forces against women. Even the positive accomplishments of women are often presented as beating the sexist odds stacked against them. Some of these

issues are of great importance to students and their parents. Because of this, parents must sign a consent form acknowledging they are aware that their children will be learning about the issues before they can attend the class:

Mrs. Brown: And they all have to sign a form, all the girls, their parents have to sign a form. And the letter's like, "We will be discussing a number of controversial issues, and I'm hoping you will discuss them with your daughters, and I hope they approach you for your opinion. But nevertheless, we will be discussing them."

Many of the girls talked about topics that were sad and/or scary to them. Rape and violence against women were weighty and depressing topics that they could do little to change. Including it in the course was significant and necessary. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the girls found thinking about rape upsetting. Beyond feeling helpless, girls also expressed sadness for their fellow women, grief over troubling experiences, and fear about their own safety:

Moira: When the guest speakers would come in and talk about, like, when they were raped or something. It was so sad.

Bree-Anne: It was really intense, it's so hard, you start seeing her cry, it's like, "Oh my god!"

Angela: Yeah and it's like, a lot of girls were leaving. 'Cause I don't know if that's ever happened to them, but a lot of them felt like they needed to leave, lots of people were crying, it was pretty – yeah.

Marsha was a particularly effective guest speaker, and hearing her speak about her rape obviously impacted the girls heavily. This topic was particularly dense, partly because it was not new to the girls and partly because it drove home that even a well-known and respected woman from their community could be a survivor of sexual assault.

Carly mentioned another Women's Studies topic, women's health issues, that caused her concern:

Carly: I didn't like when we talked about, like, cervical cancer and all that, but that needed to be in there. I just didn't like it because I was uncomfortable but I, I'm happy it was in there. 'Cause it needs to be in there. But yeah that was probably the only thing I didn't enjoy.

Auburn: Do you know why you didn't enjoy it?

Carly: No, I'm just, I don't like thinking about things like that because it gets me really scared. It does, I get really nervous about stuff like that.

Carly recognized that the topic was important and expressed appreciation for her new knowledge, but noted that it nevertheless made her feel uncomfortable and worried. Other difficult topics tended to be controversial ones.

Abortion is obviously a contentious topic at the best of times. The situation was no different in Women's Studies. Some girls were strongly opposed to abortion. Mrs. Brown noted that this topic was so volatile that she – not one to shy away from controversy – tended to leave it alone as much as possible:

Mrs. Brown: I find abortion is a more touchy subject because I find some of the girls are just so vehemently opposed to it they will not listen to the other side of the argument, and they get angry. So we just leave it alone. Although I tell them, you know, that technically a true feminist supports the choices that other women make, and you have the right to control your own body. And that's part of it. But I kind of just, they just dig in their heels and they get ugly about it, so there's no point in going there.

Although she described herself as pro-choice, Mrs. Brown recognized that the topic was difficult to discuss without someone getting angry, and, for the most part, tried to avoid the highly controversial topic in her class.

I was hesitant to even bring abortion up in interviews – an interview could rapidly deteriorate into an argument if a participant were to ask my opinion, and then disagree with my pro-choice views. Thankfully this did not occur. Depending on the tone of the interview, I would decide whether or not it seemed wise to take the interview in that direction. When I did decide to go ahead with it, I tried to bring the topic up in a subtle

manner, without directly asking about abortion.

It was likely partly because I was cautious in bringing the topic up in interviews that girls who did talk about abortion expressed pro-choice views. However, they recognized that the topic was highly contentious in class. Becky wanted to “take it back” after her classmates “flipped” when she said she would choose to have an abortion if the situation arose. While Traci was not targeted in this way, she nevertheless recognized the issue as volatile:

Traci: Yep, well we looked at, I think that was one of the causes of one of the fights we had. Some girls were like, “But you're taking another's right to life,” and then, but at the same time if you're a rape victim, you're not going to want to keep that baby. It's a reminder of what happened to you. But then there's some people who, you look at it and they use it as a contraceptive method, and that's wrong. I think having the choice to have an abortion is a positive thing. Personally.

I found Traci's manner interesting here. She began with a pro-choice statement, but qualified it by using one of the least offensive abortive situations (a woman pregnant due to rape) as reason for her opinion. She then made a statement that was sympathetic to the anti-choice stance, but finished by strongly saying that a woman's right to choose was positive. I thought Traci's approach was a clever way of keeping her pro-choice stance as acceptable as possible, while still directly stating that she is pro-choice: “I think having the choice to have an abortion is a positive thing.” This method might have been useful in persuading anti-choice classmates (and others) that being pro-choice was not necessarily evil. I also note that Women's Studies may have been the first opportunity girls had to defend their pro-choice or pro-life stance, and this would have been an important moment for growth and learning.

Homosexuality is still a controversial topic in North American high schools

(Meyer, 2009; Anagnostopoulos, 2009). Although the topic did not appear to cause tension in class, girls nevertheless recognized it as a difficult topic in that hate and judgment were exhibited towards homosexuals in their school, the community, and the larger society. As discussed in Chapter Four, girls reported a great deal of homophobia in their school, and consistently expressed their opposition to such judgment. Even though Women's Studies students agreed that homophobia is unacceptable, talking about homosexuality in high school classrooms continues to be tricky.

Women's Studies covers a wide variety of topics, many of them highly controversial. Whether the issues discussed cause dissent within class, as in the case of abortion, or not, as with homophobia, the class deals with some very real issues. Much of what they talked about is being faced in adult society as well as in high school. That the Women's Studies class involves mature thought and discussion about such complex topics speaks to how the course combats some forces of ageism by trusting students to act like adults while tackling these topics.

Difficult topics are par for the course when it comes to understanding minority rights, and engaging in anti-oppressive education. Mrs. Brown and her Women's Studies class tend to hit these issues – from violence against women, to illness, to homophobia – square in the face. It is a course with “guts” that is not afraid to take students into the realm of the knowing. However, there is the potential for the coverage of such topics to cause fights among girls, invite disagreement between adolescents and their parents, and lead to feelings of sadness and fear.

Possible Course Improvements

Though girls had to think carefully before they could come up with any criticisms or suggestions for improvement to the class, a few issues emerged. Perhaps predictably, those who suffered from a breach of confidentiality argued that there needed to be firmer guidelines surrounding confidentiality, and that students who failed to maintain others' privacy should be punished for their oversight – perhaps by being removed from the class. Further, Tanya suggested, people should have respect for differing opinions even if they did not agree:

Auburn: Can you tell me about the things that could be fixed?

Tanya: Um, definitely elaborate on the confidentiality, I think if you're going to have an open classroom setting like that, it needs to be there. And if another girl is talking or sharing, yes, you can have your own opinion, write it in your little journal thing for the teacher, but you don't need to broadcast and announce it to the class.

It is important to note that, despite having her story shared on facebook, Tanya did not regret sharing the experience; she felt that the majority of the class learned from her narrative, and the few who chose to make fun of her were simply not worth her time. Further, students felt that, generally, confidentiality was maintained very well, and that the personal aspect of the class was essential.

Another improvement students suggested was to have more practical advice. They learned much about the theoretical aspects of feminism, the history of women, and issues faced by women, but felt that how to deal with issues when they arose was not adequately addressed. Girls gave several examples of issues that they would have appreciated learning how to deal with in practical terms. Encountering sexual harassment in day-to-day as well as work life, facing an unexpected pregnancy, and advice about non-

heterosexual relationships were listed as practical advice girls would have found useful.

The sexual harassment and assault issue is highlighted in Angela's interview:

Angela: I think that she did a lot of protecting yourself, but I think she could have done more. Like, if you're walking by yourself, call someone, or always walk with someone, or stuff like that. Or like, if someone's yelling at you, do something, or not do something 'cause I'm not really sure what to do sometimes.

Angela also noted that work was a common place for girls to face these issues, but that the dynamic there was more complex, since girls feared losing their jobs. Having detailed her sometimes terribly sexist working conditions, Angela noted that though having the knowledge from Women's Studies helped her at least understand it was unfair, she did not have the tools to deal with this situation:

Angela: And in that kind of work environment it is really hard to be there, and I dread going there every week, because it is a horrible place to be, and it's so removed from everybody, and I'm the only girl there and it is just hard. Yeah. I think just talking about it more and being more open about it, saying like, women can do it, but it is hard – just so you know. So you can prepare yourself, because no matter what you want to be, it'll be hard.

Auburn: Did you guys talk about the legalities of it at all?

Angela: Yeah, she was like, "You do not have to put up with it! You can go and talk to someone." But I think if I go talk to someone, I think they will tell me "Well you can go find another job, like you are a girl so you can go, it's not like you have to have this job." Where, if it was a guy being targeted by a girl, I'm sure they'd do something about it, like fire the girl or something, but because I'm a girl and I don't necessarily do anything other than, like spark-watch and clean up, I think they would just fire me, be like "If you can't handle it, don't be here."

While this unfair work environment is not legally supported by the provincial labour codes (Labour Relations Consultants, 2004), Angela, sadly, is probably right: Without supporting documents and legal assistance, she could try to resist and raise a protest, but it is likely it would become far more effort than it is worth before anything came of it.

Other girls also noted that more information about workplace issues would be

helpful:

Bree-Anne: Maybe just talk about the workplace more, as in, it is a place that you're targeted a lot. And even if there are other girls there, and there might not be, you're still targeted a lot.

However, knowing that you might be targeted, and knowing how to fight back are two different things. Tanya pointed out that awareness regarding workplace sexism was not enough; rather, girls needed to know how to go about fighting back:

Tanya: Women are sexually harassed and everything daily, and we touched on how wrong it was and everything, but we never learned how to go about it. 'Cause you can, there is unions and stuff for jobs, and you can do stuff about it. But that was never really touched on.

Perhaps including a review of the labour codes, the role of unions, and how to effectively approach and communicate with one's boss about these issues would help the girls resist the unhealthy work environments they expected to face, or already faced.

Maria pointed out another issue that could have had more practical advice. She thought it would be helpful to know more about how to deal with, and what options are available, in the event of an unexpected pregnancy:

Maria: More problem assessment. Like assessing a problem as a woman. She could maybe teach us – like, say one day you get all, you miss your period and bam! You're pregnant! How to deal with that. She never really taught us stuff like that, I think that would be a good thing to be taught in Women's Studies.

Maria understands that even the best contraceptives, used responsibly, are not 100% reliable, and wants to know what she could do if she found out her birth control had failed. Again, the Women's Studies class covers several ideas surrounding the issue, but misses providing the information and tools necessary to handle things should a complicated situation arise.

The third bit of practical advice girls mentioned was to include information on maintaining healthy relationships, particularly non-heterosexual romantic relationships. Perhaps left out because it did not seem to be relevant in this school, girls nonetheless noticed the absence of information regarding gay relationships:

Tanya: She never really touched on what you were – we only ever really talked about straight relationships. There was nothing, ever. Occasionally they were mentioned.

Maria: We never talked about the gay pride march, anything like that. ... That's a good thing, you should definitely put that in your little thing. Talk about straight relationships, sexuality relationships.

This was the only time, during all interviews, that a participant felt an issue was important enough to insist I include it in my “little thing” (by which she meant my masters thesis). The issue is an important one, and including gay relationships alongside discussions of heterosexual relationships could help students. The benefit would not be limited to lesbian and gay students dealing with high school relationships, but also would benefit heterosexual students feeling confused about homosexuality. Further, it would symbolize Women's Studies alliance with and support of gays and lesbians, thereby countering the strong presence of homophobia within Vista View High.

Unlike those detailed so far, the final improvement was not suggested to me in the interviews. Rather, I noticed an absence and wondered at it: A unit on women with a disability was not a part of the curriculum. Further, disabilities were difficult to accommodate within the classroom. In Chapter Three, we saw how Mrs. Brown struggled to be “equitable and fair” in grading a student with severe dyslexia. She also told me of another instance involving a disabled student:

But they made the mistake one year of putting a girl in there that was really severely special needs, like she would have been probably functioning at the

grade 2 level. And they stuck her in there without an aide. Like I know the girl, and I was kind of surprised to see her and I was like, “Are you sure you're in the right class?” “Yep, yep, I'm supposed to be here,” – shows me her time table. I'm like “Okay! Well have a seat in the circle,” and we were talking about witches and witch burning and what that was all about. She went home to her grandma and was like “Blah blah, witches are dying!” and her grandma was like, “Get her out of that course. What were you thinking?” and that really wasn't my fault, so I was like, “Yeah, that might have been a mistake.” I really didn't – I didn't think it was a good idea, but I really I have no control over who gets put in my class and who doesn't, right?

This story brings forth several complex issues. First, what does our segregation of special needs students mean? Is anti-oppressive education only realistic with intelligent, high functioning people? How do budget constraints affect those with different abilities (that is, would the situation have been different if this student had had an aide?). How can teachers meet the diverse needs of their many students? Assuming feminism and emancipation are just as important (if not more important) to those with learning disabilities, how do we make these concepts accessible for such people? These important questions do not have easy answers, but require diligent deliberation by provincial education boards and teachers. The Alberta Teachers' Association (2010) has developed a booklet, *Here Comes Everybody*, to guide teachers in welcoming diversity. Attention to this and similar research will help teachers and administration understand the best way to make sure schools provide an inclusive atmosphere for all students.

When I first read through transcripts, I made a connection between Mrs. Brown's comment, above, and Tanya's assertion that attendance in the class should be a privilege reserved only for those capable of handling the responsibility of keeping others' confidences. These notions were developed for important reasons, but have problematic consequences. It is true that including a learning disabled girl, or one who has not

grasped the importance of respecting others' opinions and privacy, could have a detrimental impact on the classroom experience. On the other hand, however, it is possible that these girls – the judgmental ones and the judged ones – might be the ones who could benefit the most from the curriculum.

These are complex problems that cannot be fixed by a simple theory, or a quick policy change. Rather, Kumashiro (2000) argues that anti-oppressive education is not easily defined and that:

There is always a space between the teaching and the learning, and rather than try to close that space (and control where and how the student is changed), the teacher should work within that space, embrace that paradox, and explore the possibilities of disruptions and change that reside within the unknowable. (p. 46)

Meeting the needs of all students is a challenging and fluid process. If it were able to meet the needs of all students, Women's Studies might be considered more effective. On the other hand, the positive experience of the majority of students might suffer in such a situation. An even more effective teaching strategy, supported by adequate financial backing, might make Women's Studies better. More discussion on effective anti-oppressive education and anti-oppressive theory is presented in Chapter Seven.

Several concerns surround the Women's Studies course. Student vulnerability is increased due to the sharing, open atmosphere, and disturbing, scary, and sad topics covered in class. Undoubtedly, there is room for improvement. However, the class accomplishes multiple goals, such as empowering girls, educating students about women's issues, and preparing girls for life after high school. The breadth of information included in the class could not be covered without inviting disagreements and discussion. Girls believe the gains of the course far outweigh the negative aspects. Their Women's

Studies class is a form of anti-oppressive education that seriously takes their varied needs, opinions, and backgrounds into account. They learn information that has the potential to impact their self-concept and identity. In the next chapter, I explore the connection between anti-oppressive education and post-structural identity theory.

Chapter Eight: Analysis, Recommendations, and Implications

Education and its Impact on the Self

In this chapter, I describe a theoretical joining of anti-oppressive education and post-structural identity theory. The overlapping of two such theoretical approaches is a complex process, but is well suited to the nature of this study. Understanding the effectiveness a Women's Studies course can have in aiding the development of adolescent girls' internal protective factors and academic self-concept involves the overlap of two very different perspectives: adolescent girls' identity formation, and the structure of the educational course. I also consider implications of the study, and give recommendations regarding further research possibilities.

The course under examination involves an innovative anti-oppressive curriculum and feminist teaching style. Various forms of anti-oppressive education have been devised over the years, and the Vista View Women's Studies course is just one example of many such educational endeavours. Drawing from the descriptions and findings of the study, this chapter discusses anti-oppressive aspects of the course.

A deeper understanding of the fluidity of experience and the effect of identity on our lives is enabled by post-structural identity theory. Post-structural identity theory allows us to name the impact societal and discursive structures have without discounting personal capability. Because of this dual analysis, identity theory has been applied to other studies on adolescent girls (Pomerantz, 2008), and has proven to be important in understanding girls' navigations of the society in which they live.

Applied separately, these theories are important to a study of this kind. Together,

they allow a deeper understanding of how girls' experiences of Women's Studies are impacted by diverse forces. To enhance clarity, each of these theoretical approaches are discussed separately in relation to my research. The concepts are then knitted together, and the findings are woven into a complete theoretical pattern for my feminist analysis of the impact this Women's Studies class has on involved students.

Vista View Women's Studies as Anti-Oppressive Education

Schools are an important discursive context from which to understand girls' negotiations of adolescence. The presence of a course such as Vista View's Women's Studies provides a counter point to normative school discourse, and is a complex site for innovative research where both the broader school context and the course's impact on girls' experiences of that context can be studied. While 15 years of Women's Studies classes has not transformed Vista View into a healthy high school with an empowering environment, participants nevertheless shared ways in which they, personally, grew in knowledge and confidence through their participation in Women's Studies. This study did not research the wider impacts of Women's Studies on the school or community; however, girls stressed the great impact the course had in their own lives.

Referring back to the literature, several features of the Women's Studies class can be considered feminist teaching practices: Dialogue and discussion, equality between all members (including teacher and guest speakers), and empowerment of students, are significant forces in the class. These features diverge from traditional teaching practices, encouraging a new, respectful way of educating. Kumashiro (2000) details four types of anti-oppressive education: education for the other; education about the other; education

that is critical of privileging and othering; and education that changes students and society.

Though it includes aspects of all four types of anti-oppressive education, the Women's Studies course at Vista View High most closely matches Kumashiro's (2000) description of *Education for the Other*: The main goal of the class is to educate young women about women's issues. Rather than ignoring the dynamic gender plays in girls' experiences of high school, the Women's Studies course tackles issues head on, and embraces the differences that impact girls in high school. As discussed in Chapters Five and Six, the class was designed to provide girls with specific knowledge that is important to female adolescents, and to empower girls through knowledge, sharing, and a respect for women's experiences. Girls talked about gaining new respect for their gender, increasing confidence in themselves as women, and feeling personally connected to their new knowledge about women's issues:

Moira: I felt better about my gender and that, like – yeah – more empowered.

Fawn (Survey Respondent): I learned skills necessary to be strong and proud of being a female. Parts of the class helped with my own personal self-esteem issues.

Further, the benefits of the course, described in Chapter Six, coincide with much of the intents of anti-oppressive theory as laid out by Kumashiro (2000): Girls described feeling empowered, enlightened, and intelligent. After the class, they felt strong and capable, stood up to oppressive forces, and critically analyzed their surroundings:

Janelle: Just 'cause, like, when Mrs. Brown would talk, she made it clear that you're your own self, you shouldn't let anyone tell you what to do and who to be and stuff, it just helped.

Auburn: And do you think you thought about that before too, like--

Janelle: I thought about it, I just didn't really believe it as much, but once, I

don't know, like after the class, it made me realize and it helped a lot.

Auburn: Do you think your confidence level went up?

Janelle: Mmhm. Oh yeah. For sure.

Auburn: Do you know what, in particular, what made it go up?

Janelle: Just like the advice she would give and just, I don't know, she'd just say stuff to give me confidence I guess.

Nandita (Survey Respondent): It made me a little more outgoing than I was in the other classes and built up my self-esteem and confidence levels more.

Just as North (2007) found in her study of student response to anti-oppressive education, where anti oppressive classrooms “creat[ed] an environment in which a diverse group of students felt safe both revealing

personal experiences with oppression and acknowledging their own prejudices

” (p. 91), Vista View Women's Studies students recognized and appreciated their differences and prejudices. Further, the course itself was taught in a way that fit more closely with their learning needs than regular courses did: They were treated as equals, respected, and were able to link their own experience to material learned through extensive class discussion. Their teacher, Mrs. Brown, employed anti-oppressive educational tactics in carving a space, meant especially for the girls, out of the regular high school curriculum; in that space, she employed alternative learning strategies.

Unfortunately, even though Mrs. Brown and Women's Studies class members encouraged boys to attend Women's Studies, in 15 years, no more than four boys took the class at one time.¹² Although, prior to this year, at least one boy had attended each year, the class is not able to extensively *Educate about the (female) Other*: Though the boys who have attended were reported to learn a great deal from the class and see women's

¹² Boys were not interviewed as a part of this study, so could not be approached for information on their experiences during Women's Studies.

issues in a new light, those boys are few and far between.¹³ Despite protestations from girls arguing in favour of Women's Studies, senior male administrators as well as uninformed students tarnish the reputation of the class with ignorant stereotypes surrounding feminism. Few boys actually take the opportunity to benefit from, as Kumashiro (2000) advocates, learning *about* oppressed girls. On the other hand, white participants did, to some extent, learn about the (other) Other as they learned about women in Third World countries and Indigenous women in Canada.

As far as being *Critical of Privilege*, girls seemed to come to understand about others' privilege over them, but were less clear on identifying their own privilege; for example, in Chapter Five, Traci very readily understood how sexist oppression affected her, but was not as clear on how her own racist oppression affected First Nations people. Similarly, Becky, who in Chapter Seven demonstrates an understanding of challenges to women's reproductive freedom, also failed to recognize (in Chapter Five) the presence of racism in the school. While units on culture are included, girls did not make a connection between the disadvantage faced by women in Third World countries, and their own advantage. In other words, girls were critical of the struggles raced and impoverished women faced, but did not recognize their own privilege and the role it might play in this situation. Similarly, several of my entirely heterosexual-identified participants did understand the negative impact of homophobia, and spoke out against it on behalf of others, but did not cite their own heterosexuality as privilege.

Kumashiro's (2000) final form of anti-oppressive education, which problematizes

¹³ Because I studied girls, and the year I studied the class lacked male students, my research is not able to fully address questions surrounding the involvement of boys in a class such as this. Further research and limitations of the research are discussed later in this chapter. A thorough analysis of masculinity is offered by Pascoe (2007).

“the citing of harmful discourses and the repetition of harmful histories” (p. 40) can be seen at work in Women's Studies, as they re-read history and other standard curricula, filling significant omissions and gaping holes with the “herstory” of women. However, a deep discussion of the role of discourse is not included. Students did describe a brief conversation with Mrs. Brown where the overuse of the phrase “that's so gay” was named as problematic due to its larger discursive implications (that “that” is bad, so, by association, gay is also bad). However, the pervasive effects of common language and dominant discourse are missing from the curriculum.

One of the most important aspects of the Vista View Women's Studies class is the sharing and open atmosphere that (ideally) allows for a diversity of experiences to be shared and appreciated. In fact, Kumashiro's ultimate argument is that

though educators have come a long way in detailing approaches that address different forms and different aspects of oppression, they need to make more use of post-structuralist perspectives in order to address the multiplicity and situatedness of oppression and the complexities of teaching and learning. (Kumashiro, 2000, p. 25)

He argues further that there is a paradoxical space between teaching and learning, within which teachers must “explore the possibilities of disruptions and change that reside within the unknowable” (p. 46).

On the other hand, Butin (2002) problematizes anti-oppressive education, since it “may itself be a pedagogy of silencing which is resisted by those in disagreement (p. 14). He warns against simplistic conceptions of power, noting that no discourse, even anti-oppressive discourse, can claim to be outside power relations. For example, in Chapter Seven girls' feelings of occasionally being silenced when Mrs. Brown expressed her strong opinions were detailed. They described feeling silenced in that moment, but clearly

demonstrated in interviews that they recognized that this was problematic. Kumashiro (2002) responds to Butin's critique by noting that, instead of advocating a particular, "correct" anti-oppressive practice or perspective, post-structural anti-oppressive education "hopes that students question the effects of a variety of practices and perspectives, including the ones their teachers say are anti-oppressive" (p. 18). Girls at Vista View demonstrated such analytical thinking as they critically considered multiple dimensions to not only the variety of topics covered in the Women's Studies class, but also their interactions with Mrs. Brown.

Anti-oppressive educators are further criticized for their strong focus on "the myth of the autonomous individual as an agent of self-transformation" (Butin, 2002, p. 14). Kumashiro (2002) responds by noting that anti-oppressive education does not, in fact expect students to individually change themselves; rather, "it is an effort to change oppressive ways of doing or learning" (p. 17) In light of this argument, I now move to discuss post-structural identity theory, which acknowledges the roles of both social structure and individual agency in relation to adolescent girls.

Girls' Identities and Post-structural Identity Theory

As described in the literature review, identity acts as a bridge between the external and the internal; outside structures and inner self (Hall, 1986; Pomerantz, 2008). The girls in my study are affected by the two components of identity. They describe themselves both in terms of surrounding discourse and in terms of an inner being:

Jodi: And I come to this school, and next thing I know I'm walking down the middle of the hallway. I mean, I'm like, okay, okay, I notice the difference.

Wanda: Everone's looking at you!

Jodi: Yeah, 'cause I'm like the only black kid in the whole town, and

everyone's looking at me, and I'm like, "Okay!" Yeah, I'm different.

Jodi: With me, I don't care about anything. If you're going to insult me, you're wasting your time, 'cause I don't care. I don't give a shit. That's the type of person I am.

Here, Jodi talks both about noticing and reacting to surrounding white-majority discourse and her own racial difference, and about a personal strength – some inner force – that allows her to identify and act as an individual despite and along with these environmental factors. Other students demonstrated similar experiences where they at one point talked about reacting to structural factors, but at another claimed to be impervious to outside influences. Maria talked about the negative impact bullying has had on her confidence:

But I think my confidence is like, at zero when it comes to pickin' up for myself, just 'cause I've been [bullied]. Way back in grade 8, I started getting boobs, and some girls were too, but I guess 'cause I was wearing tank tops, mine just showed a little bit, and I ... started getting called a slut.

Though some of the bullying that crushes her confidence uses Maria's womanly figure as a reason for targeting her, she also mentioned her rejection of external expectations:

Maria: I've stopped bothering [with my appearance]. I seriously – like honestly, I'll come to school with my hair looking like – What's that one chick with the snake hair?

Auburn: Medusa.

Maria: Medusa's hair! It's like you touch my hair and you'll die! That's how bad I can come to school looking like.

In various ways, girls reject and embrace discursive influence. They speak about not caring and staying true to themselves, but also note that they acutely feel the impact of their surroundings. Two of the benefits girls described from the course were related to this doubleness: The class strengthened their ability to critically assess detrimental surroundings, and it empowered them to feel increased inner strength.

Individual behaviours are complex and colourful. Girls' actions are not solely

determined by their social environment. Neither are they completely independent of those social structures and surroundings. Rather, they build their identity based on both the structures they live within, and the “stuff” they have inside. They are dealing with sexism and ageism, perhaps racism, homophobia, and ableism: Whatever is going on around them affects them personally, but they, like all people, also have some core inside them that makes them themselves.

The Women's Studies course is a drastic departure from other curricula in the school. It brings an important new tone to the high school discourse for Women's Studies students. More than a change to discourse, however, the class may also have the potential to impact girls' inner self.

Knitting Theories: Women's Studies as Impacting Discourse and Inner Being

The anti-oppressive education that my participants were involved in – Vista View Women's Studies – impacts the girls' perceptions, actions, and ways of thinking. For example, they talked about possessing new knowledge and employing heightened critical awareness in their daily lives. The Women's Studies curriculum was a different discourse than that to which they were normally exposed – one that named various oppressions, suggested alternative ways of thinking about gender and gender expectations, and opened a new worldview to them. In this, they were exposed to new texts. They were momentarily surrounded by information that contradicted hegemonic discourse. The alternative discourse enabled girls to engage in a paradigm shift. At the same time, girls' inner “core” was affected by the class as they felt supported in their growth as strong, capable women. Thus, with its anti-oppressive approach, the class affected what girls

experienced both inside themselves *and* outside.

Returning to Pomerantz's (2008) application of Hall's (1996) notion of identity as a suture between discourse and inner being, I argue the anti-oppressive Women's Studies class has the potential to impact girls' identity through a discursive shift: Exposing the girls to this new and important feminist discourse opens them up to a whole different way of thinking. In fact, many of the girls described such a shift in their thinking – they became critical of their surroundings and refused to accept all mainstream discourse at face value:

Bree-Anne: It totally opens your eyes to see a bigger world. There's so much going on that no one even knows about.

Jodi: We watched [a movie] in Women's Studies, and I'd watched it before, and like, it's alright ... but when I watched it in Women's Studies, it just changed the whole, like, my whole view of the movie. Yeah it was different, I watched it differently the first time, I didn't know what was going wrong, even though I knew, I didn't know exactly what to pinpoint.

Girls began to apply this alternative way of thinking to hegemonic discourse, and, perhaps for the first time, saw the mainstream as fallible: rejecting media expectations of women, recognizing the silence surrounding violence against women in Canada (particularly in First Nations communities) and globally, questioning the absence of women's experience from their own curricula, and more.

Another important aspect of the class was its alternative, anti-oppressive format. Based on discussion, sharing, and support, girls were not only accessing new information; they were also learning at a more fundamental level. Not just facts and history, the girls were learning the value of female camaraderie, and the need for them to support and be supported by other women. Girls often talked about feeling validated by something Mrs.

Brown said in class or how it felt to hear a moving story from a classmate or a guest speaker:

Maria: [Mrs. Brown] just giving me the feeling of being in control of myself. I think that's how she'd tell you, "you can do this as a woman, you can do that as a woman, don't let anyone ever tell you that you can't." Just like, I'm hearing it from another woman's perspective too, she's like "right on!" Knowing that I can do whatever I need to do in life, and I can still do it as a woman.

Difficult to put a name to the phenomenon, many girls nevertheless felt an inner change: an increase in confidence, heightened compassion, and better self-worth.

Based on these findings, the Women's Studies class (along with other forms of anti-oppressive education) has the potential to positively affect girls' identity on both the discursive and the subjective level; girls can be empowered by knowledge. Further, they gain from acquiring an inner strength. Understanding what is going on around them while maintaining personal resolve can impact a girl's resiliency when she is faced with adverse situations. In short, the anti-oppressive course provides an alternate discourse while simultaneously giving girls an internal boost, and thus impacts both factors of Hall's notion of identity.

Girls described undergoing two changes while in Women's Studies: an increase in self-worth and inner strength, and accessing an alternate knowledge base – a new discourse. Clearly a form of anti-oppressive education, the Women's Studies class placed girls in a position of value, where they were respected and taken seriously. Further, they began learning about topics that had true relevance in their own lives as victims of various types of oppression. The class was undoubtedly an admirable example of effective and innovative anti-oppressive education. More than that, and in fact *because of*

the anti-oppressive format, the class was a source of renewed identity: a place for inner and discursive growth. Women's Studies not only opened girls' eyes to a new world out there; it also opened their hearts to a new world inside.

Implications of this Research

The Vista View Women's Studies students I interviewed unanimously thought the course was beneficial. Though multiple factors come into play, the overall findings in my study indicate the Women's Studies course has a highly positive effect for girls. Every single participant described the course in glowing terms, even if they had moments where they felt targeted, vulnerable, or upset by what occurred in the class. They valued it so much that they all mentioned that the course should be more widely available.

Research Question and Study Findings

My primary research question was to determine whether the Vista View High School Women's Studies course was empowering to girls. I also wanted to know what specific aspects of this anti-oppressive education most effectively contribute to girls' confidence and academic self-concept, or perception of self-efficacy in academic subjects (McGrew, 2008). As demonstrated throughout this thesis, particularly in Chapter Five, the course did indeed empower girls. Girls felt stronger through newfound knowledge: They were better able to understand and analyze situations in women's history and their own lives once armed with relevant information they learned in Women's Studies. Further, they gained a feeling of sisterhood and felt supported by their peers. They also learned the value of supporting others, and standing up for those who are oppressed.

Girls who took the Women's Studies class came to value themselves and their own

experiences. Through sharing and listening, girls recognized that their own stories, as well as the narratives of their female peers, were important and worth recognizing as such. Within a high school curriculum largely focused on men, recognizing the accomplishments of women was a new and important moment for these girls. Further, such a recognition validated their own experiences in a world that tends to treat adolescence, and adolescent girls in particular, with disdain.

The process of empowerment is hard work for these girls; they did not just merrily go through the course being enlightened. Facing difficult topics, learning to open up and trust, and having trust broken were all challenging aspects of the class. The class had some similarities to a therapy session: hard, painstaking personal work and learning leading to an increased confidence and stronger inner core (Kumashiro, 2000).

While the course, overall, was very positive, there were negative aspects. Some of these negative aspects, such as facing one's fears by tackling scary topics, could lead to more growth. Others, however, such as dealing with a breach of personal confidentiality, could be damaging for girls. Such aspects of the class need to be addressed in order to keep the class positive.

Recommendations for Most Effective Women's Studies

There is no one right way to offer a class like high school Women's Studies. However, the findings of this study suggest that some approaches are preferable to ensure such a class is as anti-oppressive as possible. My research has yielded insight into a few suggestions as to how a class can be designed for maximal effectiveness in empowering girls through relevant knowledge, critical analytical skills, and practical tools for

resistance of oppressive forces. I follow with some brief recommendations regarding what individuals, teaching associations and provincial governments can do with the information presented.

More Effective Class Offering

Based on girls' comments, I argue an important part of an excellent class is a passionate teacher who has developed the communication and support skills necessary to be there for her students as they take on difficult topics. Mrs. Brown cares strongly about her students and her Women's Studies course. She pours herself into the class, eager to see girls empowered and finding their voices. She has fought administrative battles to see that the class continues to be offered, and faces judgment from colleagues about the offering of such a course. An effective teacher needs to demonstrate true compassion for women's issues and for the adolescent girls she teaches. She must recognize that adolescence is a difficult time for girls, and aim to empower them through information, support, and confidence. She must want to see girls become healthy, aware young women.

As a university student, I have often heard conversations about a professor making or breaking the class. Course content matters, but instruction is at least as important. Likewise, committed teachers are important in any high school class. However, they may be even more important in a class like Women's Studies – where norms are confronted, gender roles are contested, emotional topics are covered, and group discussion is encouraged. A teacher must truly want to teach a class like this, and truly desire to engage on such a personal level with students in order for such positive results to be seen. Otherwise, discussions could fall flat, and the significance of various topics might be lost

on students. Worse, disillusioned by poor teaching, students might develop a negative, resentful attitude towards the topics and theories. Quality, passionate instruction is key to delivering any course with true success (Putnam et al, 1995; Sadowski, 2008); the Women's Studies class is no exception.

Beyond instruction, the topics included and how they are covered are significant. Topics must be relevant to students and presented in a fun and interesting manner. Girls should be armed to deal with diverse oppressive situations in patriarchal society by including a variety of topics about women such as women's health, women in history, violence against women, women in sports, and women across cultures. Further, such a broad range of topics avoids the class getting stuck in a rut or becoming overwhelmingly focused on one particular topic. What's more, different students have different interests; this diversity is better addressed by including a range of topics. Undoubtedly, several topics exist that could be covered, and time constraints prevent all of them from being included; therefore, a teachers' knowledge and preference will necessarily inform which topics take precedence. At the same time, a wide variety of relevant topics should be covered to best allow for diversity within the class. Student preference might also be taken into account through class discussion about which topics matter most.

The course format is also significant – it sets the class apart from others as something innovative, personal, and exciting. Nakkula (2008) and Galley (2008) both point out the need for teachers to establish healthy, empowering relationships with students by acknowledging different learner needs and making use of research conducted on student learning identities. Mills (2006) argues for healthier classrooms in which girls

can develop stronger confidence and sense of self-worth. Participants echoed these ideas as they repeatedly mentioned how the safe, comfortable, discussion-based atmosphere was essential to the success of Women's Studies in bolstering their confidence and providing them with relevant knowledge. Achieving this safe environment could be accomplished in a variety of ways. The Vista View format involved sitting in a circle, which not only facilitated everyone's participation in discussions, but also symbolized equality among students, teacher, and guest speakers. Further, journaling as a major portion of the classwork keeps assignments personal and relevant to each student's life. Having several guest speakers from diverse walks of life allows for multiple points of view and fascinating stories. Overall, the format of any Women's Studies class should encourage acceptance of women's worth, personal discussion, and a recognition of equality among all present.

Interviews revealed that the biggest problem in the class was classmates failing to maintain confidentiality. While most students felt that it was safe to share personal stories, a few detailed harmful experiences where a breach of confidentiality placed them in a humiliating and vulnerable position within the school. Students require assurance of confidentiality before they feel comfortable divulging secrets in class. At the same time, it is impossible for an instructor to guarantee that placement of such trust in each other will be founded. Perhaps an in-depth, serious discussion about the damaging effects of a breach of confidence would help girls grasp the importance of keeping secrets safe.

Each teacher will undoubtedly create a unique Women's Studies class. While several recommendations can be made, the dynamic in each course offered will vary – not

just between classes, but within each class, from year to year, and even from day to day. Kumasashi (2000) advocates that anti-oppressive education allow for fluidity within classes, for moments of paradox and complicated interactions, and for students to experience moments of crisis (p. 44-46). Each course will have its own flavour, but certain aspects, such as being discussion-based, including a variety of topics, and others detailed above, are advisable for maintaining an effective Women's Studies class.

Certain practices should be discouraged from Women's Studies classes. Traditional lecture format, where an instructor is in a position of power over students and discussion is discouraged, would be ineffective. Study findings indicate that disregarding the importance of respect among and between students, teacher(s), and guest speakers would not bring about fruitful development. Finally, focusing on only one, general group should be avoided: The concerns of white, heterosexual, able bodied women should not be assumed as encompassing the concerns of all women, and intersectionality should be acknowledged and understood.

Widespread Women's Studies

Just as the Miss G_ Project's "primary objective has been to get a Women's Studies course into the Ontario secondary school curriculum" (2011, np), In keeping with participants' focus, I would like to see the more widespread occurrence of Women's Studies throughout Western Canada. I believe government provincial education departments should closely examine the value of increased offerings of such emancipatory courses in their provinces' high schools. Girls should be encouraged to talk to their parents, teachers, and administrators about the advantages they see in having a

Women's Studies course at their school. Interested teachers could begin developing potential lesson plans, approach their superiors, and work (just as Mrs. Brown did) towards having a course implemented within their school. Interested girls and teachers could work together to pressure (just as the Miss G_ project has done), on both the local and provincial levels, for such a course offering. If governments offer bureaucratic resistance such as that faced by the Miss G_ project in Ontario, the cause should be pursued with renewed vigor (Miss G_, 2011).

Interested individuals can try organizing and offering after school, extracurricular Women's Studies discussion groups for adolescents and adults alike. Even small steps, such as a feminist book club, could help encourage the overall acceptance and valuation of anti-oppressive education. Mrs. Brown pointed out to me that I – not a teacher, but nevertheless a concerned individual – am more than capable of hosting a Gender Studies discussion group in my city. Action is possible, and based on the findings of this study, preferable: Girls described significant empowerment and growth from taking the course, indicating that increasing the presence of such education would be beneficial.

Recommendations: Further Research

While it is important and new, this research study barely scratches the surface of what remains to be learned about high school Women's Studies classes. Similar classes offered in other high schools could be studied to determine the effects of those specific curricula, and to conduct a comparison between different school offerings. Different teachers have different styles, and different schools provide different backdrops to the course teachings. Understanding more about these variables and their effects will clarify

what makes such classes most effective. The above recommendations are based on one class in a particular community – better understanding could be made possible with increased information.

More than mimicking this study in the few other schools that offer Women's Studies, the study needs to be expanded in each site. It would be informative to return to Vista View to actually participate in the class, and conduct detailed observations of interactions and discussions. Extensive hallway and classroom observations could be done throughout the school semester to understand more about the development of girls' identities in this particular setting. Further, longitudinal analysis could determine more long-term effects of the class. This information would contribute to a clearer understanding of why the Women's Studies class has the positive effects seen.

Future research should also involve speaking with girls who did not take the course; the girls I spoke with had a deep understanding of gender inequality and developed increased confidence after taking the course; however, it is possible this had something to do with their decision to take the class. Would any girl benefit from the class, or was there something specific about *these* girls that prompted them to take the class in the first place, and thus influenced its positive effect on them? Many of the girls said they thought the class would be interesting; their previous interest in the topic could indicate that the class has such positive effects only on people already holding an interest in the class. On the other hand, girls who chose to take the class simply because it fit in their timetable or because they needed the credits also reported that it was a unique and important class. Further research on who chooses to take the class would tell us much

about how wide-reaching it could be.

Involving boys in the research would provide significant new data. I chose to focus on girls in this study to bring their needs into the spotlight; however, a consideration of the impact the class has on boys is equally important. Mrs. Brown indicated that boys who took the class in the past fit right in and found the course to be very eye-opening. However, it would be beneficial to hear, from the boys themselves, how the course impacted them and what they found most important, least significant, and most emotionally involving.

Few men take Women's Studies in university¹⁴; it is likely that younger boys would be even more hesitant to take such a class in high school. While talking to the few young men who have taken the class would be informative, it would also be interesting to talk to boys who did not participate in the class. Based on stories told by participants in this study, it is likely that some boys would describe feeling hostilities towards the class. Such a negative attitude could be rooted in sexism, feeling threatened by the class, simply being uninformed about the course content, or a combination of any of these factors. Finding out why boys chose not to take the class would provide an understanding of assumptions, environmental factors, and societal influences informing sexist behaviour in high school.

Several girls mentioned that one male teacher in particular, and, perhaps as a result, several boys, sulkily suggested that there be a “Man's Studies” class to counter the presence of a Women's Studies class. Girls felt targeted by these comments, stating that the men saying it did not understand what their favourite class was about, nor appreciate

¹⁴ While the number varies from class to class and university to university, I have never seen more than 20% of a Women's Studies class be visibly male.

that much of the existing curriculum is already very man-centred. However, the argument has merit – perhaps it would be beneficial to have a gender-studies class geared towards teaching young men about the constraints gender roles place upon both men and women.

Unfortunately, this is not what the male teacher had in mind: He cornered me one day to tell me that I should do a PhD study on Man's Studies. When I asked him, interestedly, why I should do that, he informed me it was because men are “confused” and do not understand “you women.” He went on to tell me that “manly” skills such as changing oil and how to properly tie a dress tie would be included. While I do not begrudge the teaching of such skills, and I believe that information on maintaining healthy relationships (both romantic and platonic) would be greatly beneficial, this instructor has sorely missed the point of Women's Studies. Further discussion with him led me to believe that, more than truly desiring a course discussing the impact of gender norms for boys, he simply resented that a specific course about women existed, which is a common response from those who are uninformed (Rogers & Garrett, 2002). This is unfortunate; however, the idea that boys also need guidance regarding gender roles is sound, and could certainly be a site for further exploration.

Extensive research could be conducted with the implementation of programs in other locations – perhaps in a wide variety of places such as particularly impoverished inner city areas, rural communities, and prestigious schools across Canada. Such research would clearly need extensive planning and funding; nevertheless, it could be revelatory and would be instrumental in spreading the benefits of such a class much farther than the few (but very important) solitary, locally developed curricula currently in place in five

Western Canadian schools.

Inspiration

Conducting this study was strongly inspiring for me: Participating girls not only confirmed my rejection of stereotypical portrayals of girls, but also impressed me deeply with their strength, wisdom, and passion. I felt honoured to speak with them, and am deeply indebted to them for sharing their stories, thoughts, and feelings.

Girls told me of the struggles they had faced, their life situations, and their plans for the future, all without excess drama or attention-getting tactics generally expected from girls this age. They spoke with self-assuredness, maturity, and a sprinkling of humour. I saw scant evidence from the interviews and survey responses that adolescent girls are the hopeless, flighty idiots they have the reputation of being. Despite this, I saw ample reason *for* them to act in such ways: They were surrounded by a sexist atmosphere focused on beauty ideals, sex, and media influence. Something kept these particular girls from falling prey to the atmosphere and buying into the pressure.

The course was certainly important, and should be considered a useful tool for adolescent girls to reach such a state of strength and confidence. The class provided them with complex understandings around gender equality that they were able to apply to their own lives. Further, the class gave them a forum for working through their personal experiences of sexism and empowered them to resist such incidences in the future. Participants unanimously agreed that the class was significant in empowering them to grow in confidence, knowledge, and solidarity. However, it is essential to remember that they themselves are also responsible for such growth. The girls are smart and capable, and

while I argue that the course helped them reach such a place in life, I was also humbled by the inner strength I observed in the girls. They are exceptional; and they may have become so without Women's Studies. However, the course smoothed and shortened their long, rough road to self-actualization by providing knowledge, strength, and support. The girls certainly deserve no less.

Conclusion

High school is a critical time in the development of young women's self-esteem. Gender not only influences the processes of teaching and learning, but the pressures of everyday life are enormous and "girls are coming of age in a more dangerous, sexualized, media-saturated culture" (LeCroy & Mann, 2008, p. iv). These combined factors lead to adolescence being a particularly difficult time for girls. Additionally, gender inequality is far from the only oppression facing young women. Many encounter ageism, racism, ableism, homophobia, and "othering" experiences. These intersect to become highly important issues in the lives of women and may make success as adults hard to attain.

A qualitative case study of one of only five high school Women's Studies programs offered in Western Canada uncovered the impact the program has on the development of young women's internal protective factors in relation to intersectional oppressions women of this age may face. Findings indicate that participating in the Women's Studies program may aid girls in becoming confident, self-sufficient young women, and that this type of program contributes to healthy development during adolescence.

"This was by far the class that made me more passionate about learning. I was more motivated to learn in my other classes. It made me want to be a strong,

intuitive, well informed, and successful woman, and more confident to express more educated opinions in other classes.”

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Appendices:

Appendix A: Interview Guide

Warm up Questions:

How long have you been attending this school? How do you feel about school?
What sorts of books/tv do you enjoy?

Women's Studies Questions:

How did you end up taking the Women's Studies class?
How do you feel about the Women's Studies class you took?
How does it compare to other classes you took in high school?
What did you think of your Women's Studies teacher's approach to the class?
Did the fact that this was a part of school affect the way it impacted you? (Probes: Would you have preferred some sort of non-formal Women's Studies class? Do you think you would have attended such a class? How did being graded on your work make you feel?)
Has your participation in Women's Studies affected how you think about the world?
What were your favorite things about the class? (Probe both class experience and curriculum)
Please describe your favorite memories of class time.
What would you like to add to the class?
Is there anything you would have liked to take away from it?

Individual Questions:

Do you think you are confident?
Do you think you have experienced sexism?
Have you ever felt targeted for something about your body (such as your race, hair colour, physical ability, weight?)
Did your Women's Studies class make you think about these things more? (How so? Are you glad it made you think about them? Why/Why not? If not, do you wish it had?)

Wrap Up Questions:

Is there anything else you want to say about Gender Studies?
Is there anything else you want to say?

Appendix B: Follow-up Interview Guide

Can you tell me about assignments you had to do in Women's Studies?

How did you feel about the assignments?

How do your teachers usually act in other classes? Do you feel respected in other classes?

How did Mrs. Brown act in Women's Studies. Did you feel respected in Women's Studies?

Do you ever feel like people don't respect you because you are young?

How does this make you feel?

Do you think bullying happens in school?

What sorts of bullying?

Sexual harassment?

Homophobia?

About sexual activity?

About sexuality?

Race?

Disabilities?

Poor kids?

Does this school have cliques?

Do you ever try to empower other girls? (stand up for them? Support them when they take on a challenge?)

Did you feel that you bonded with other girls in the Women's Studies class?

Were there any that you didn't like? How did you act in that situation?

What happened when people disagreed in class?

Was the class more open than most? Sharing stories?

Did that ever make you feel vulnerable?

Do you think other girls were vulnerable?

What happened when people disagreed?

Do you live your life differently after what you learned in Women's Studies?

Appendix C: Online Survey Questions

How did you end up taking Women's Studies 35?

How do you feel about your experiences in the Women's Studies 35 class?

Has your participation in Women's Studies 35 affected how you think about things you encounter in your daily life?

How did Women's Studies 35 compare to other classes you took in high school?

Please tell me anything else you would like to say about Women's Studies.

Appendix D: Parental Consent Form

Case Study of Vista View High School's *Women's Studies 35*

Researcher: Auburn Phillips

Your daughter is invited to participate in a research study on adolescent girls' experiences in a high school course. I am interested in what she learned from *Women's Studies 35* and her perceptions about the course.

This research will require about 1-1.5 hours of your daughter's time. During this time, she will be interviewed about her experiences in *Women's Studies 35*. The interviews will be conducted at school and will be recorded. If she is interested, we can meet a second time to talk some more about her experiences. This second interview would not exceed 1 hour. Interviews will take place at her high school in a location that is private but not isolated. The interview could be conducted during a spare period, or right after school, whichever is most convenient for you.

Your daughter's participation in the study is completely voluntary. She may choose to stop participating at any time. The decision not to participate will not influence the nature of relationships with the teachers and staff at her school now, or in the future. The school will not have access to any information provided, including the decision to participate in the research.

Your daughter may decide to withdraw from the study at any time, for any reason, without any consequences. Not participating will not affect her grades or how she is treated in school. If she withdraws from the study, her data will not be included in the analysis.

It is unlikely your daughter will feel any risks or discomfort from participating in the research. However, she will be asked questions that could be of a sensitive nature to her. She has the right to choose not to answer a question, and can stop the interview at any time. She is encouraged to let me know if she is feeling any distress. Further, I will provide a reference list of resource services that might be useful to her.

She should find the interview to be enjoyable and rewarding, as she can share her experiences without judgment. By participating in this research, she may also benefit others by helping people appreciate the most beneficial components of a *Women's Studies* class.

Several steps will be taken to protect your daughter's anonymity. While the interviews will be recorded, the recordings will be destroyed once I have personally typed them. The typed interviews will **NOT** contain any mention of her name, and any identifying information from the interview will be removed. Data will be safely stored in a locked cabinet in a locked private office and only I will have access to the information. In rare cases, my supervisor, sworn to confidentiality, may ask to see the data, and she will be permitted see it. All information will be destroyed after 5 years time.

All information your daughter supplies during the research will be held in confidence and her name will not appear in any report or publication of the research. Confidentiality will be provided to the fullest extent possible by law. However, in accordance to the laws governing the protection of youth, if she discloses information that indicates she or others are at serious risk, the

proper authorities will be contacted.

The results from this study will be presented in a publicly available masters-level thesis. They may also be published in academic journals concerned with gender and education in order to help academics and educators better understand the experiences of young women in Gender Studies programs. The results may also be presented in person to groups of academics and educators and at conferences. At no time, however, will your daughter's name be used or any identifying information revealed.

If you wish to receive a copy of the results from this study, or if you have questions about the research in general or about your daughter's role in the study, please feel free to contact myself, Auburn Phillips, either by telephone at (403) 942-0085, or by e-mail at auburn.phillips@uleth.ca. You can also contact my supervisor, Dr. Leah Fowler, at (403) 329-2457 or by email at leah.fowler@uleth.ca.

If you have any other questions regarding your rights as a participant in this research, you may also contact the Office of Research Services at the University of Lethbridge at 403-329-2747 or research.services@uleth.ca.

To see examples of similar styles of research reports, please refer to the following list or contact me at the above contact information.

- Sheryl Clark. 2009. A Good Education: Girls' Extracurricular Pursuits and School Choice. In *Gender and Education* 5(21).
- Shauna Pomerantz. 2008. *Girls, Style and School Identities: Dressing the Part*. Palgrave Macmillan, New York, NY.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

I _____, consent to allow my daughter, to participate in "Adolescent Girls' Experiences in Gender Studies Programs in High School" conducted by Auburn Phillips. I have understood the nature of this project and permit my daughter to participate. I am not waiving any legal rights by signing this form. My signature below indicates my consent.

Parent Signature _____

Date _____

Appendix E: Participant Consent Form

Case Study of Vista View High School's *Women's Studies 35*

Researcher: Auburn Phillips

You are invited to participate in a research study on adolescent girls' experiences in a high school course. I am interested in what you learned from *Women's Studies 35* and your perceptions about the course.

This research will require about 1-1.5 hours of your time. During this time, you will be interviewed about your experiences in *Women's Studies 35*. The interviews will be conducted at school and will be recorded. If you are interested, we can meet a second time to talk some more about your experiences. This second interview would not exceed 1 hour. Interviews will take place at your high school in a location that is private but not isolated. The interview could be conducted during a spare period, or right after school, whichever is most convenient for you.

Your participation in the study is completely voluntary. You may choose to stop participating at any time. The decision not to participate will not influence the nature of relationships with the teachers and staff at your school now, or in the future. The school will not have access to any information provided, including the decision to participate in the research.

You may decide to withdraw from the study at any time, for any reason, without any consequences. Not participating will not affect your grades or how you are treated in school. If you withdraw from the study, your data will not be included in the analysis.

It is unlikely you will feel any risks or discomfort from participating in the research. However, you will be asked questions that could be of a sensitive nature to you. You have the right to choose not to answer a question, and can stop the interview at any time. You are encouraged to let me know if you are feeling any distress. Further, I will provide a reference list of resource services that might be useful to you.

You should find the interview to be enjoyable and rewarding, as you can share your experiences without judgment. By participating in this research, you may also benefit others by helping people appreciate the most beneficial components of a *Women's Studies* class.

Several steps will be taken to protect your anonymity. While the interviews will be recorded, the recordings will be destroyed once I have personally typed them. The typed interviews will **NOT** contain any mention of your name, and any identifying information from the interview will be removed. Data will be safely stored in a locked cabinet in a locked private office and only I will have access to the information. In rare cases, my supervisor, sworn to confidentiality, may ask to see the data, and she will be permitted see it. All information will be destroyed after 5 years time.

All information you supply during the research will be held in confidence and your name will not appear in any report or publication of the research. Confidentiality will be provided to the fullest extent possible by law. However, in accordance to the laws governing the protection of youth, if you disclose information that indicates you or others are at serious risk, the proper authorities will be contacted.

The results from this study will be presented in a publicly available masters-level thesis. They may also be published in academic journals concerned with gender and education in order to help academics and educators better understand the experiences of young women in Gender Studies programs. The results may also be presented in person to groups of academics and educators and at conferences. At no time, however, will your name be used or any identifying information revealed.

If you wish to receive a copy of the results from this study, or if you have questions about the research in general or about your role in the study, please feel free to contact myself, Auburn Phillips, either by telephone at (403) 942-0085, or by e-mail at auburn.phillips@uleth.ca. You can also contact my supervisor, Dr. Leah Fowler, at (403) 329-2457 or by email at leah.fowler@uleth.ca.

If you have any other questions regarding your rights as a participant in this research, you may also contact the Office of Research Services at the University of Lethbridge at 403-329-2747 or research.services@uleth.ca.

To see examples of similar styles of research reports, please refer to the following list or contact me at the above contact information.

- Sheryl Clark. 2009. A Good Education: Girls' Extracurricular Pursuits and School Choice. In *Gender and Education* 5(21).
- Shauna Pomerantz. 2008. *Girls, Style and School Identities: Dressing the Part*. Palgrave Macmillan, New York, NY.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

I _____, consent to participate in “Adolescent Girls' Experiences in Gender Studies Programs in High School” conducted by Auburn Phillips. I have understood the nature of this project and wish to participate. I am not waiving any of my legal rights by signing this form. My signature below indicates my consent.

Participant Signature _____

Date _____

Appendix F: Web Participant Consent Form

Qualitative Study of Women Specific Senior Secondary Curricula in Western Canada: Social and Educational Impacts on Young Women Informed Consent Form

Researcher: Auburn Phillips

You are invited to participate in a research study on adolescent girls' experiences in Grand Cache Community High School's Women's Studies 35 course. I am interested in what you took away from this course and how you felt about it.

It is unlikely you will feel any risks or discomfort from participating in the research. If you do not want to answer a question, you do not have to. If you do experience some negative feelings, please call [Vista View] Crisis Line at [REDACTED].

You may also find answering the questions to be enjoyable and rewarding, as you share your experiences without being judged. By participating in this research, you may also benefit others by helping people to better understand what are the best parts of a Women's Studies class.

I will do everything I can to protect your anonymity; however, due to the nature of electronic communication, you cannot be assured of anonymity. As soon as possible after your survey response comes in, I will remove it from the website hosting the survey. Further, your email address will not be kept nor in any way be associated with the research. Your survey responses will be kept on a private, password protected computer in a private office, and only myself and my supervisor (sworn to confidentiality) will be able to see the data. Your comments will NOT be associated with your name, and any identifying information from your comments will be removed before being used in a research report. All information will be destroyed after 5 years time.

Please note that if you chose to "like" the Facebook page recruiting subjects, your Facebook friends may assume that you participated in this research. In this way, your anonymity may be compromised. "Unliking" the Facebook page will not have any consequences.

All information you supply during the research will be held in confidence and your name will not appear in any report or publication of the research. Confidentiality will be provided to the fullest extent possible by law. However, in the event that you disclose information that indicates you or others are at serious risk, I will need to contact the appropriate people to help you deal with this.

Your participation in the study is completely voluntary. You may choose to stop participating at any time. The decision not to participate will not influence the nature of relationships with the teachers and staff at GCCHS now, or in the future. GCCHS will not have access to any information provided, including the decision to participate in the research.

You may decide to stop participating in the study at any time, for any reason, without any consequences. If you withdraw from the study, your data will not be included in the analysis.

The results from this study will be presented in a publicly available masters-level thesis. It

may also be published in academic journals concerned with gender and education, to help academics and educators better understand the experiences of young women in Gender Studies programs. The results may also be presented in person to groups of academics and educators and at conferences. At no time will your name be used or any identifying information revealed. If you wish to receive a copy of the results from this study, you may contact me at the email address given below.

If you have questions about the research in general or about your role in the study, please feel free to contact me, Auburn Phillips, by e-mail at auburn.phillips@uleth.ca. You can also contact my supervisor, Dr. Jo-Anne Fiske by email at joanne.fiske@uleth.ca. If you have any other questions regarding your rights as a participant in this research, you may also contact the Office of Research Services at the University of Lethbridge at 403-329-2747 or research.services@uleth.ca.

[“I ACCEPT” BUTTON] By clicking “I accept” you consent to participate in Adolescent Girls' Experiences in Gender Studies Programs in High School conducted by Auburn Phillips and indicate you have understood the nature of this project and wish to participate.

Appendix G: Case Study of Shauna

Before I ever made it to Vista View, I gave a lecture to a first year Women's Studies class at the University of Lethbridge. They had read a chapter of Pascoe's (2007) *Dude You're a Fag: Sexuality and Masculinity in High School* that week. Their instructor was aware of my research and had asked me to come in and speak about my research in relation to some of the concepts found in the chapter. Nervous that the first-year students would be disinterested in my research, confused about the concepts, or even hostile towards such a young guest lecturer, I was pleasantly surprised when students were not only interested but gave an overwhelmingly positive response to what my research was aiming to do. Students spoke about the importance of such a course and their wish that they had taken something similar in their education – not just in high school, but perhaps even earlier. I felt invigorated and excited to pursue the research.

A few hours after giving the lecture, I received an email from one of the students. Shauna had attended the junior high Calgary Girls' School. She had spoken in class about the positive, empowering experience she had from grades six to nine, and how greatly it contrasted to her experiences in a public high school from grades ten to twelve. She offered an interview about her experiences in the feminist-flavoured girls school since she thought it would be relevant to my research.

Initially delighted at the chance to “pilot” my interview guide, I rapidly realized that Shauna's story could be an entire study in itself. Self-described as learning disabled with a high intellect, Shauna gave a unique view of the school and the *Go Grrrls* program, which is akin to Women's and Gender Studies courses. A unique school for

junior high girls, the Calgary Girls' School offered students a more woman-focused general curriculum, as well as the specific gender-focused program *Go Grrrls*.

Shauna detailed experiences of intense bullying both prior to grade six, and after grade nine, but cherished her years at the Calgary Girls' School, where feminine appearances were less significant, all girls were encouraged to excel, and her special needs were accommodated. Clearly, the school had advantages in that it gained revenue from paying parents, and thus was better equipped to meet diverse student needs. Just as important, however, was the innovative rationale behind the school:

“It provides an environment and teaching style designed to optimize girls' learning, and to prepare girls for lives, leadership, citizenship and commitment. The single-gender environment enables the development of girls' intellectual, creative, personal, and physical potential in a safe, nurturing, yet challenging environment.” (Calgary Girls' School, 2007, np)

Shauna pointed out that, in addition to having a girl-focused atmosphere, women's accomplishments were also a part of day-to-day learning in this school. Thus, the regular curriculum was not male centred like we have seen in Vista View High:

But the teaching style was really geared towards, like there was a lot based on women. Our social studies curriculum was mostly based off of the Famous Five, we went to, in downtown Calgary in the Olympic Plaza, there's statues of the Famous Five and so we went there, we did a lot of stuff involving famous women, important women, stuff like that, whether it was in science or math or whatever.

Shauna considered the inclusion of women's accomplishments to be an essential aspect of her school's curriculum.

In addition to this inclusion of women in the general curricula, Shauna also valued the *Go Grrrls* program:

We had to take *Go Grrrls*, every class had to take it, we had to take it every year. The curriculum just got more in depth as we went along. So that was

pretty fun. We had a lot of guest speakers, and they also, every year at our school, they have something called the Women's Gala, which is where students can nominate an important woman in their life that they believe deserves to be honoured and then, it's a formal event and the women get honoured. ... So it's got a lot of women's studies things, just not a specific course called Women's Studies.

Similarities can be seen to Mrs. Brown's Women's Studies class. Certainly, there were major differences; particularly the resources that the Calgary Girls' School had, and their related ability to establish feminism within the larger curricula. However, the most striking similarity is that, with good instruction and good material, Shauna felt empowered through her education.

Like the girls at Vista View High, Shauna loved both the feminist roots informing her school, and the *Go Grrrls* program. Ostracized throughout her life, the woman-centred program and all-girls atmosphere in her junior high boosted her confidence levels during junior high. However, leaving the school behind to attend regular public high school was a crushing experience:

I had an incredibly high confidence level in junior high ... And I was really confident going into high school, and then it just died within the first two months. So I definitely had more confidence in junior high than I did in high school.

Despite her decrease in confidence upon entering public high school, Shauna held tightly to what she had learned in junior high. She faced judgment and resistance, but nevertheless stuck to what she believed in, and changed a piece of her world:

As you go through it [the feminist curriculum], you get more prepared. And then in high school, you start noticing all the stuff. Like I mean, the *Go Grrrls* curriculum explained sexuality, gender, all that stuff, and then in high school [this was left out], so I became a gay rights activist in my high school, so I did the Day of Silence, I wore a shirt that said "homophobia is gay," all that kind of stuff. The *Go Grrrls* curriculum set me up for stuff like that, and I did that all 3 years of high school. I mean I got ostracized for it by students,

but there was always the group of us that did it. And then in my 12th year, I did my presentation on gay rights. We had an extended lunch that day and I talked about Gay-Straight Alliances ... Our high school did not have one. So within an hour and 15 minutes of my extended lunch, my friend and I wrote up a proposal, and got it basically sorted out, and then it [a GSA club] started in September this year.

Shauna may have come from a completely different school and taken a different program than study participants; nevertheless, she reaped several of the same rewards: an increased confidence, a strong belief in herself and what she stands for, and increased knowledge and critical awareness:

So the Go Grrrls curriculum set me up for all this stuff, and it taught me that none of that stuff should matter, even though in this society it does.

Though it is impossible to generalize based on the findings of a small study and a separate pilot interview, it is telling that every single participant – even Shauna, from a different school and having taken a different course – thought so very highly of their Women and Gender Studies education. It seems that, with good effort, courses such as these could be offered more widely, to better the lives of many more girls.