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An examination of an intervention program: The Sister Circle

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AN EXAMINATION OF AN INTERVENTION PROGRAM: THE SISTER CIRCLE

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction

of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership

by

Bobbi McDaniel

July 2012

Anthony Collatos, Ph.D. — Dissertation Chairperson

This dissertation, written by

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under the guidance of a Faculty Committee and approved by its members, has been submitted to and accepted by the Graduate Faculty in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I have long contemplated how quickly I would write, thank, and praise those who have helped, supported, and guided me along the way. This task of writing acknowledgments is a bit difficult as the faces have been blurred into a sea of beautiful people, many places, and vast experiences which have culminated in this very moment. For the many lives I have encountered, I wish to express profound gratitude for this journey which is representative of my past struggles, present contentment, and future endeavors. I am the answered prayer of my ancestors, the reassurance of unconditional love, and the peace that surpasses all understanding.

To the guiding trinity in my life; my grandmother, Mrs. Eloise Robertson, my mother, Mrs. Shirley Morris and my aunt, Mrs. Eva Simmons without whose combined love, sacrifice, and faith I would not believe and trust in the supreme trinity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as I understand it. To my dad Mr. Bobby McDaniel, who I believe guides me in the unseen, I see you smiling!

To my siblings, each of you had a unique imprint on my life, forming me into the person I am. Barbara, Michael, Cynthia, Sonia, and Anthony thank you for the many life lessons in loving and family. Stephanie and Stephen you are as close as siblings and without a doubt a grounding force that sustains me. To my nieces and nephews, your lives are a source of joy and inspiration, remember I am always here when you need me.

To my friends and my fellowship, you show up as guides to my true and highest self. For all the past, present, and future sisters in my circle thank you for mirroring life. For the Sister Circle in this research, thank you for allowing me to be a member, mother, observer, teacher in your circle, your raw truth, gives me strength. You are loved.

The writing of a dissertation is a journey, for which there is a guide, namely the chair. Dr. Anthony Collatos you have been patient, kind, and tolerant. From you I have learned how to regulate my internal drive and external emotions. Let's just say, I leave this process knowing when to put the pedal to the metal, change lanes, slow down, cruise and when to stop and let someone else drive. You, your wife, and children endured Bobbimania. Sincerely, I appreciate and thank you. I will pay it forward.

Finally, my dearest Taylor Imani Heath, you far exceed any definition of the word daughter. Your love is like no other. For the many times you told me "I am proud of you," gave me a kiss and a hug, made me coffee or tea, ordered pizza for dinner, told me to go bed and understood I was on a journey, I am eternally grateful. Remember, your journey is your own, there are no shoes to fill, no requirements to meet; you are, and always have been, on your own righteous path. I am proud to be called Taylor's mom.

This dissertation is dedicated to the memory of Keyona Turner whose brief stay on this earth is a reminder of why the Sister Circle is needed.

VITA

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ABSTRACT

This study is the examination of an intervention program designed specifically to address the needs of African American female adolescent (AAFAs) high school students. The urban high school is located in a low socio economic area that suffers from social debilitating factors such as high rates of high school drop –outs, high unemployment, high rates of incarceration, drug use and gang violence. The intervention program was designed to act as a safety net in the lives of the AAFAs and influence their academic, social and emotional development. The AAFAs adolescents who participated in the program had high rates of discipline referrals, low achievement on standardized test, and poor attendance at school.

The study utilized field notes, documentation from weekly sessions and interviews of the participants, teachers and administrators, incorporated school information and the journal writing of the participants to determine if the intervention program named the Sister Circle influenced the academic, social and emotional development of the participants. The intervention program experienced a 92% retention rate, over 90% decline in discipline referrals, increased attendance rates in school attendance, academic performance and graduation rates among participants.

Chapter I: Introduction

Overview of the Study

This study is an examination of the Sister Circle (SC) program. The Sister Circle is an intervention program serving 25 African American female adolescents (AAFAs) who are students at a low socioeconomic, urban high school in Los Angeles, California. The AAFAs students are faced with numerous social barriers such as foster care, gangs, domestic violence, and generational poverty. In addition, the participants often have personal and emotional obstacles such as low academic achievement, poor self-esteem, and childhood obesity. This study reviewed an intervention program specifically designed to effect academic, social, and emotional change in the lives of these students. The study examined two years of weekly program reports and conducted a set of in-depth interviews with participating students, teachers, counselors, and administrators. Ultimately, this study will inform on how to develop and implement intervention programs for AAFAs in urban high schools and the effects (if any) of these programs on their participants.

Development of the SC Program

The SC Program began as a result of the administrative decision of one principal to intervene on behalf of the AAFAs on his campus. In 2007, the Central High School principal described the AAFAs "as failing in every area of their lives" J. Flecha (personal communication, November 1, 2006) and sought to create a program to assist the young women. There were over 100 discipline referrals made to the dean's office in the first semester of that school year, including physical and verbal conflicts involving AAFAs on the campus. Although AAFAs represented less than 10% of the student population, over

90% of the discipline referrals were for AAFAs related issues. A huge disparity existed in the number of discipline referrals in comparison to the number of AAFAs on campus. Traditional interventions being used on the Central High School campus were not producing desired results. The school employed methods such as suspension, detention, traditional counseling, phone calls home, and meeting with parents. These methods proved inadequate in addressing the issues. The principal supported additional efforts in the form of another type of intervention to address the situation. There was substantial support from the administration on the campus to be creative and to consider alternative strategies in the development of the program. The principal of the school had previously observed community and conflict-resolution trainings I had conducted as part of a city agency's outreach program. Impressed with my efforts, he asked me to work with the AAFAs on Central High's campus.

Once the program began, the activities and meeting sessions were structured around a combination of topics both I and the youth participants suggested. Those topics included, but were not limited to, racism on campus, college access/tours, sex, drugs, relationships with mothers, beauty and hygiene, career exploration, friendships, and conflict resolution (See Appendix A).

Nature of the Intervention

The SC began as an intervention program in the spring of 2006. The original intent of the program was to assist young African American female students who struggled academically, socially, and emotionally and to develop a safe-place on campus to meet as a group to discuss their issues and concerns. Initially, the SC consisted of 9th and 10th graders and later expanded to include some 11th graders. The students'

participation in the program has always been voluntary; the program was presented to the participants as an extracurricular activity. The principal's vision was that this program would provide the needed intervention for to gain self-esteem, stop fighting among themselves and others, and learn respectful behavior, which they were not exhibiting toward themselves, teachers, and staff.

The first year of the program was full of emotion, tears, joys, success, and failures, as the girls struggled to become a group and, moreover, to accept and respect each other. The second year brought more structure to the program, meetings, discussion, and more participants. The principal referred girls who had behavioral problems and were on the verge of "dropping out" of school or getting "kicked out" (expelled) of school. After the SC was initiated, participation increased and the group became a combination of the original members and the new referred participants.

My role as leader of the SC program has been to implement an intervention program that addressed the issues facing these young women; the obstacles that prevent them from achieving academic success, participating in school and social groups, and responding to life's challenges in an appropriate manner.

The first year of the SC operated without an allocated budget from the school district. In its second year the school district allocated funding to continue the program; in the third year the SC was again partially funded. I am the only official staff member of the SC. However, the SC would not be possible if staff members of the school (teachers, counselors, office administrators, librarian, and aides) were not willing to assist with multiple tasks such as distributing and collecting permission slips for field trips, chaperoning field trips, making participants aware of meeting times, allowing the SC to

meet in its designated space when the principal's conference room was unavailable. Without this support assuredly the program would not continue to thrive.

Site

The participants' school is located in a densely populated, low socioeconomic, urban community. Though the school was traditionally a predominantly African American site, there has been a huge demographic shift in the past 20 years from largely African American to Latino. Currently, the school population is 90% Latino and 2% African American. The community has had several issues concerning gangs and drug trafficking throughout the past 20 years. Much of this community's challenges plays out at the school level. The challenges of this community and how often they affect the students within school has not fully been examined.

Although there is a rapidly growing body of literature about AAFAs and their experiences, the current body of knowledge is limited. This study examined the intervention program in an effort to glean its effects, if any, on addressing the issues of its participants who attend this school and reside in this community.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study was to examine how SC members perceive the influence of intervention on their academic, social, and emotional development, as well as their behavior in and out of school. In addition, this study includes interviews with the principal, teachers, staff, and SC members that provide several lenses through which participants were viewed. These interviews provide a lens to better understand how school leaders perceived the influence of the SC on AAFAs students' behavior at Central High School. Lastly, this study examined the impact of consistent participation in

voluntarily SC program meetings. The study analyzed and coded weekly reports that were written after each meeting with the participants. AAFAs are overrepresented in data representing statistics such as high school dropout rates, teen pregnancy, drug use, violent behavior, and juvenile incarceration. Robinson and Ward (1991) describe the phenomena of researchers focusing on related urban issues such as poverty, drugs, and gangs that affect AAFAs rather than the resiliency that AAFAs display to counter urban conditions. The data in this study examined a two-year period and explored beyond the negative statistical information aforementioned to document AAFAs resilient behaviors that may be the result of interventions they receive. This study provides insights into how urban high schools may more effectively meet the needs and challenges of AAFAs assisting AAFAs in their social, emotional, and academic development.

Research Questions

This study examined the perceived impact of the SC as an intervention program for AAFAs and hopes to assist other female adolescents in urban high schools who may encounter similar issues. Further this research adds to the body of knowledge that exists about AAFAs their experiences in schools, their resilient behavior, and ultimately their lives. The following questions aimed to discover new theories, impressions, and effective strategies in working with urban AAFAs:

1. How do SC members perceive that the intervention has influenced their academic, social, and emotional development?

2. How do SC members perceive that the intervention influences their behavior and attitude in and out of school with peers, parents, and school personnel?

3. How do teachers and counselors perceive that the SC has influenced AAFAs students at Central High School?

Statement of Problem

The sociopolitical issues of race and gender in an urban high school setting, combined with the normal struggles of adolescent development, increase the probability of emotional, social, and academic delays for AAFAs. According to Cooper (2009), "For girls there is an increased likelihood of self-esteem declines and subsequent academic-related difficulties during adolescence" (p. 502). The combination of race, gender, sociopolitical, and family issues in an urban environment qualify AAFAs as a unique and challenging population that is seldom examined in an academic setting.

Beyond the issues that AAFAs face in urban high school, there are issues in the urban communities in which they live. There has been an increase in female adolescent involvement in the juvenile justice system between the years 1991 and 2000. According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation, by the year 2004, adolescent females accounted for 30% of all juvenile arrests as reported by the U.S. Department of Justice (2009). This increase has led to research by the U.S. Department of Justice report on girls and delinquency. This report outlined four protective factors in delinquency: (a) presence of a caring adult, (b) school connectedness, (c) school success, and (d) religiosity. This study pointed to the need of an intervention that would provide a caring adult who would connect AAFAs to school through participation in a group that meets regularly, while emphasizing school success through spiritual-universal principles such as unity, collectiveness, empathy, and purpose.

Colman, Kim, Mitchell-Herzfeld, and Shady (2009) suggest that AAFAs who are

involved in the juvenile justice system at the onset of adolescence usually make the transition to adult criminality. The study also suggests that social and emotional issues within the family and in the community are the biggest predicators of AAFAs who will become involved in the juvenile justice system, and later, become adult criminals. Many urban high schools and community organizations are overwhelmed and confused about how to address the complex needs and issues of AAFAs in urban educational settings.

Importance of study. This study contributes to the growing body of knowledge about AAFAs and their educational, social, and emotional experiences in urban high schools and interventions that aid in their development. The study analyzes an existing issue in current educational research, namely AAFAs, and describes a specific intervention program (the SC) as well as other intervention programs that address the unique challenges that affect African American young ladies in urban high schools. The practical implication for this study is that it provides immediate information and strategic thought that can be used in the development of programs for AAFAs in urban schools. Further, this study gives insights about AAFAs in urban schools and their perceptions about themselves, the school, and what they believe they need in order to be successful inside and outside of school. Moreover, this study offers a practical outline for community workers, parents, teachers, school personnel, and all who may be involved with AAFAs to glean a more effective way in which to work with, and support, AAFAs in urban high schools.

Theoretical significance. Black Feminist Thought provides a theoretical lens best suited for this study; Black Feminist Thought among other things is the act of self-definition. There are and have been many African American writers who contributed to

the self-defining movement of Black Feminist Thought: Audre Lorde, Zora Neale

Hurston, Patricia Hill-Collins and bell hooks. Black feminist theory provides a

foundation of knowledge that can be applied to the AAFAs, and interventions and

strategies in working with AAFAs; the theory provides important historic knowledge to

present-day theory. Much of what has been researched about AAFAs has used

conventional theories that often leave out relevant historic, social, and emotional factors

that are at the root of the problems and issues that directly impact AAFAs presently.

Black feminist theory is written by and for Black women. The theory relies heavily on

personal accounts of social and emotional development through adolescence and onto

womanhood. This theory fills the gap that traditional researchers could not fill in the

Black community in the 1960s.

The Black community was often off limits to outside researchers, based on fear of

being harmed and the deficit model traditionally used by outsiders to characterize the

Black community (Stevens, 2002). Moreover the 1960s and 1970s produced significant

African American female artists, such as Maya Angelou, Alice Walker, Nikki Giovanni,

Toni Morrison, and Angela Davis telling their stories through a variety of creative forms

such as: music, novels, poetry, and the spoken word. This study leans on Collins' (2000)

theory of *Intersectionality* as an additional lens that brings gender and race to an axiom

that places in perspective the unique population of the African American female. By

incorporating *Intersectionality*, I collected and analyzed AAFAs participants using both

gender and race individually and collectively. Additionally, this conceptual framework

may have further implications for programmatic decisions in educational settings. The

theoretical significance of using both Black feminist and *Intersectionality* theories will

assist in conceptualizing this study. Black feminist theory combines gender and race in historic and present-day worlds to garner a deeper insight in to the development of the AAFAs and their experiences in school, home, and the community at large. Therefore, intersecting with race, gender, social status, and current and historic factors created a foundation for analyzing AAFAs and interventions that may be successful in working with this population. Moreover, and simply, this study incorporates both theories of Black feminist thought and *Intersectionality*, which provided a structural guide in analyzing and organizing the data.

Definition of Terms

The following definitions describe terms that are used throughout this study. They are terms, phrases, and concepts found in the research literature that have been reviewed and defined specifically for this proposal. Further, some of the definitions below have been simplified by the author and some are directly from sources as noted. The definitions and terms given can have several meanings and interpretations. However, for the purpose of this study, the following definitions should be used as contextual support.

Academic Development—participants being at grade level, on track to graduate, taken and passed required high school exit exam, SAT, ACT.

Counselor Perceptions—what counselors believe to be true about the SC Intervention Program and its effect on the student participants.

Culture—a shared belief system among a group of people that can encompass rituals, customs, and traditions.

Emotional Development—ability to engage peers, adults at school or in authoritative roles, family, and parental figures without anger, defiance, excuses (some of

the time), ability to have a conversation, and verbal exchange about their needs without

shutting down.

Engagement—the level of participation in group discussions, individual

interaction with the coordinator and attendance by each member of the SC.

In-School Behavior—ability to differentiate what is appropriate school behavior,

such as: tone and volume of voice, manner in which adults are addressed, and an ability

to accept direction from school personnel.

Intervention—interceding or taking action on someone's behalf.

"Other Mother"—a mother-like figure who may be involved in performing

traditional mother roles; this person may or may not be blood related.

Out-of-School Behavior—ability to differentiate the set of behavioral norms that

are acceptable at home, school, community; each place may require different behavioral

sets in regards to speech, physical behavior, and social etiquette.

Safe Place—a place where anything can be discussed without fear of judgment or

reprimand.

Social Development—participating in age appropriate activities such as sports

team, cheerleading, church groups and activities, girl scouts.

Teacher Perceptions—what teachers believe to be true about the SC Intervention

Program and its effect on its participants.

Limitations

There are a number of limitations to this study. The first limitation is the small

number of participants in the study. The second limitation is that the intervention

program is in its early stage of development. The third limitation involves my dual role in

the study and can be viewed as a limitation and/or a contribution. I am the researcher for this study and I am the coordinator for the SC Program. Some may view the dual role of researcher and leader of the program as conflicting. The experience of working with the participants has been a multi-layered process that has required me to serve in many roles: leader, educator, confidant, mediator, motivator, disciplinarian, and always an observer. I have had countless professional experiences and personal exposure to the social pressures and emotional issues that are prevalent in the lives of AAFAs. In some instances, my 15 years of professional experience in teaching and working in poor, urban communities, both in New York City and Los Angeles, has provided tremendous amounts of background knowledge that may bias the treatment of this study. However, according to Collins (2009), that I am an African American, woman, educator, and working with AAFAs is a benefit to the treatment of the data and, therefore, provides an even more insightful and introspective perspective to which other researchers may not have access. Having disclosed these limitations, it is my belief that this research was of the highest ethical order and focused on the facts of the study.

Assumptions

In this case study there are several assumptions to be considered:

- All of the AAFAs who participated in the study are currently enrolled in high school or were during the time that they participated in the SC.

- All of the AAFAs who participated in the study live in a central urban geographic area in relation to the school.

- All of the AAFAs who participated in this study receive free and reduced lunch (Title I) or come from working class and low-income households.

- All of the AAFAs who participated in the study did so voluntarily.

- Many of the girls (not all) had been referred to the SC for fighting, disrespectful behavior towards teachers, and apathy.

Chapter II: Literature Review

This literature review examines the research literature about AAFAs, their perceptions, how sociopolitical issues play a role in those perceptions, and how their perceptions of themselves influence learning. Additionally, attention was paid to the use of resiliency and resistance by African American females as coping mechanisms and intervention strategies that work to aid in the overall development of this unique population. Further, this chapter highlights the theoretical framework of Black Feminist Thought and incorporates basic tenets from *Intersectionality*. Both frameworks are the theoretical base that supports the foundation of this research.

Moreover, the use of Black Feminist Thought and the review of the literature are purposeful as they explain, define and illuminate the research questions. The research questions seek to discover the perceptions of AAFAs and the effects of the intervention program that they participate in. Similarly, Black Feminist Thought requires, asks, and provides black women definition and illumination of their lives and experiences as they perceive it.

Brief Reference on African American Male Adolescents

Whereas the AAFAs and the study of their experiences in society and in educational institutions is growing, there is far more literature that has been written and researched regarding the African American male adolescents (AAMA). The importance and the brief discussion of the AAMA are significant to contextualize the AAFAs, as it pertains to the challenges of race and gender.

The issues that affect AAFAs have not received the ubiquitous attention that those affecting AAMA has in the public education debate, media, or scholarly research.

Although this research is not about AAMA, it is relevant to explain briefly some of the issues surrounding AAMA. The media has played a daunting role in the villainization of the AAMA and justifying that image through misrepresented statistical data (Feagin & Sikes, 1994). Many researchers and media sources have focused their efforts on the plight of the young Black males in urban communities. Black males between 15 and 34 are nearly eight times as likely to suffer from AIDS as their white counterparts. Black males age 15 to 19 die from homicide at 46 times the rate of white males their age. Black male achievement begins to decline as early as the fourth grade and by high school, Black males are more likely to drop out; in 2001, only 42.8% graduated from high school, compared to 70.8% for their white counterparts (Dyer, 2007). The harsh reality in these statistics is the reality for many AAMA in urban communities. These statistics give a grim but accurate view of the AAMA population in urban communities across much of the United States.

Much of the research on AAFAs educational experience has been minimal compared to the research of African American males. Furthermore, hooks (1981) suggests, "No other group in America has had their identity socialized out of existence as have black women; we are rarely recognized as a group separate and distinct from black men" (p. 7). As with women studies in general, the research had been minimal until the 1960s when women started to research and analyze their own development through their own lenses and structures. In support, Muhammad and Dixson (2008) concur, saying, "Compared to the research on Black boys the volume of literature on Black girls is sparse" (p. 164). Generally speaking, researchers historically have been more focused on the male experience than the female experience. The focus of this research is about

AAFAs in an urban educational setting and interventions that are effective in addressing their unique issues and challenges. There are interventions that address AAMA that have similar issues and challenges. Intrinsically this study is tied to AAMA on the campus where the research is being conducted as there exists an intervention program on campus for AAMA. These programs sometime combine field trips and experiences in an effort to maximize resources. In addition, the blending of some activities of the intervention programs may provide positive social development between the groups.

What Are the Perceptions of AAFAs?

What are the unique challenges and issues that confront AAFAs in urban communities? The current conditions of their economic, social, and emotional status are key components. However, what AAFAs and those who work with them believe to be true about their economic, social, and emotional levels are far more important than their actual status.

Perceptions are a key component to the academic process; perceptions of self and others' perceptions may be qualifiers of achievement in an urban high school. The perception by some AAFAs is that urban high schools are not supportive of their unique needs. Moreover, Cooper (2009) suggests that self-esteem and academic achievement play crucial roles in the academic outcomes of AAFAs in urban high schools. Perceptions that AAFAs have of themselves, perceptions that teachers have, and societal perceptions play important roles in not only academic success, but in emotional development and well-being. The social and emotional development of AAFAs is rooted in relationships. According to Cooper, "Supportive social relationships may serve an important, bolstering role for both their academic related outcomes and self-esteem" (p. 502). The relationships

that teachers and counselors develop with AAFAs are, thereby, a crucial link toward their

success. Therefore, the perceptions about AAFAs among their teachers, counselors, and

administrators play an important role in relationship development.

       Teachers' perceptions. Teachers' perceptions and expectations can impact

learning and behavior. Stevens (2002) attests that AAFAs perform better in an academic

setting by *contextual learning* , which is simply having what students learn mean

something to their everyday lives, taught to them by someone who either looks like them

and/or understands and is empathic about their situation. Research points to teacher

perceptions being lower for minorities. There has been much debate in the educational

community as to the negative perceptions of, and low expectations for, minority students

(Tenenbaum & Ruck, 2007). Perception can be defined as a belief or an attitude based on

what is observed or what is thought. Some of the perceptions that are often attributed to

at-risk African American girls are loudness, rudeness, physical and sexual

aggressiveness, and disrespectfulness. Morris (2007) concurs that these attributes are, in

fact, resilient skills that AAFAs have such as standing up for themselves and demanding

respect and are often misconstrued by teachers and are labeled as un-lady-like behavior.

Further, the behavior is punished instead of redirected in a manner that would be

beneficial to a learning environment. Moreover, Stevens stated, "For black adolescents,

the journey of self-discovery involves constructing an identity as a member of a socially

devalued racial/ethnic group; most importantly, if not properly channeled, cultural

resistance for black youth can go awry and may be maladaptive" (p. 26). Many AAFAs

in urban high schools are in need of a culturally responsive directive that will enable

them to negotiate their environment in order to attain the skills needed to be successful in that environment.

Teachers' perceptions can either motivate or devalue a student. Clearly, a teacher's mind-set about the capabilities of his/her students will impact those students' learning experiences. According to Ladson-Billings (1994), educational research, as it pertains to African American students, is limited because of the stubborn behavior of an educational system to see African American students as an individual racial group; it is the ignoring or refusal to see African American students as separate in culture that permits the disappearance of an entire lens with which to view this group.

Moreover, when students' culture and heritage are devalued, they become dispensable and disregarded. As added proof of urban public school's disregard, look at the disparity in referrals to special education for emotionally disturbed diagnoses among African American students, particularly males. According to Shippen, Curtis, and Miller (2009), African American students are overrepresented in special education for various reasons, which include racial and cultural biases. There appears to be a direct correlation between the disproportionate placement of African American students and the teachers who are referring them to special education.

According to the U.S. National Center for Educational Statistics (2008), 83% of teachers in public schools are white females. Therefore, there may be a cultural lag or bias among white female teachers, given the negative research and media perceptions of African American students. Consequently, more teachers or counselors who happen to be white and are working in urban high schools with AAFAs may not have had the cultural experiences and/or relevant curriculum that would better prepare them for the academic,

social, and emotional challenges of working with AAFAs in an urban environment.

Often, when AAFAs are referred to counselors in schools, many AAFAs perceive the office or counseling staff as a part of a social system that is seeking information to hold against them and possibly their families. Moreover, the AAFAs will choose to be quiet and remain silent in counseling sessions and refrain from discussion of their problems with counselors. According to Leadbeater and Way (1996), this act of nondisclosure could be viewed as a form of resistance to outsiders, but is in fact a protective factor in sustaining self and family. Many AAFAs see the act of silence as loyalty. Nelson, Rutherford, Center, and Walker (1991) concluded, "The majority of students exhibiting undesirable behavior in school settings generally receive no services, inadequate services under the auspices of regular educational programs, or special education services applied piecemeal or too late to be beneficial" (p. 411). AAFAs are often relegated to the inadequate assistance that may be a public school's generic response to youth in crisis. Schools are inundated in trying to provide for academic, social, and emotional development. There often is little, if any, real consideration given to the cultural development or needs of AAFAs beyond traditional remedies, which may be ineffective.

It is the responsibility of the public education system to adequately prepare teachers to teach core subjects such as math and science; it is also teachers' responsibility to be able to reach students in order to teach them math and science. As Lorde (1984) articulated, the task of teaching teachers about African American students is for teachers to see them as unique human beings who belong to a distinct cultural group that should not be denied. Ignorance of African American culture may be attributed to teachers' lack

of experience and exposure to African American culture in a way that allows for the appreciation of cultural beliefs and nuances of African American heritage. It is the responsibility of educational institutions to provide culturally relevant training for teachers, counselors, and administrators.

There have been efforts made to diversify the teaching population in public schools to better represent the cultural, racial and ethnic backgrounds of the students who attend public schools. Those effort have fallen short and what remains is a majority of Caucasian teachers that bring their background and perceptions to a classroom filled with cultural norms, and ethnic identities of which their personal and often professional background and experiences may not have adequately prepared them for.

Historical perceptions. Historical perceptions and images of Black females are rooted in the institution of slavery. The description of the slave girl gives a clear image and perception of what the life and value of the AAFAs was historically. According to Jacobs (1861), "No pen can give an adequate description of the all-pervading corruption produced by slavery. The slave girl is reared in an atmosphere of licentiousness and fear" (p. 51). In a further description of the Black female slave experience, hooks (1981) states, "The black female was exploited as a laborer in the fields, a worker in the domestic household, a breeder, and as an object of white male sexual assault" (p. 22). Moreover, Black female slaves were in no way afforded protection by Black men; they were the property of their master and could be used and abused at will. Child (1836) summarized the social standing of Black women during slavery, in this statement:

> The Negro woman is unprotected either by law or public opinion. She is the
> property of her master and her daughters are his property. They are allowed to

have no conscientious scruples, no sense of shame, no regard for the feelings of husband, or parent: they must be entirely subservient to the will of their owner on pain of being whipped as near unto death as will comport with his interest or quite to death if it suits his pleasure. (p. 81)

Given the historical experience of the black female slave and the treatment she received by those in power, these images of a sexualized and aggressive woman came to be deeply rooted in institutions and it has been a continuous struggle to debunk and dismantle these perceptions in America. Further, Collins (2000) asserts that white males and institutions have long perpetuated these images of Black women as sexually promiscuous, physically aggressive, and socially uncontrollable. Unfortunately, many of these historical images and perceptions of African American females still exist not only in educational settings, but in media and in urban communities.

When historical perceptions are used to reference African American women in depends greatly on the context of the historical reference. For example, if references to slavery and its effects on the slave woman are mentioned without the benefit of focusing on the bravery and resiliency of the slave woman; AAFAs students may be left with the prevailing image of victimhood and devaluation. It is in the Black Feminist literature that the context is framed using the same example and providing the context using positive images of heroism and survival. Further, historical images that are often utilized in classrooms without the benefit of positive contextualization may serve to further exasperate the self –esteem and perceptions of AAFAs.

Self-perceptions. The self-perception of adolescent females plays an important role in their social and emotional development. Specifically, in the adolescent phase of

development, cultural identity serves as a protective factor. According to Belgrave (2009):

> Ethnic identity appears to be a particular salient issue for African American adolescents who may be confronted with racism or the isolation of minority status. Several studies have shown that ethnic identity is positively and favorably related to social variables. (p. 330)

While ethnic identity is a significant factor in positive self-perceptions, the gender factor alone is important in self-perception.

Self-image for females has become a cultural phenomenon with talk shows, self-help books, and multitudes of magazines that attempt to define and set standards for positive self-image among females. Academic researchers have weighed in on self-perceptions as well; Gilligan (1992) defines the adolescent period as a turning point for females, during which ultimately young females make decisions about who they are. Moreover, the adolescence period for a female is defined as a calamitous phase in which girls first perceive their social and personal acceptance in relationship to others.

In discussing self-perception as it relates to African American females, there must be a brief discussion on perceived beauty. This is a sensitive issue among African American females. Beautiful images of African American women in the media are scarce; often times when the African American female is represented, it is in a negative light. According to hooks (2005), "The dearth of affirming images of black femaleness in art, magazines, movies, and television reflect not only the racist white world way of seeing us, but the way we see ourselves" (p. 62). The image that represents the African American woman, either by others or African Americans, has given a perception that

Black is not beautiful and that in some way must be altered.

Hair and skin color serve as key factors in terms of self-image and beauty for the AAFAs. Consequently, negative self-perceptions often have a direct influence of one's behavior in school and with one's peers. hooks (2005) explain:

> The first body issue that affects black female identity, even more so than color, is hair. One cannot talk about the black female body self-esteem without talking about the politics of skin color about the way internalized racism encourages and promotes self-hatred. (p. 69)

For example, within popular culture the songs of contemporary artists such as Lauryn Hill (1996), whose lyrics describe Black women having "fake hair like Europeans", and "nails done by Koreans" as an anthem to be yourself, and India Arie (2006), whose song "I am not my hair", tells of the profound and daunting ordeal of the black female and her hair. The song describes the intersection of Black female identity and hair:

> Little girl with the press and curl
> Age eight I got a Jheri curl
> Thirteen then I got a relaxer
> I was a source of so much laughter
> Fifteen when it all broke off
> Eighteen when I went all natural
> I looked in the mirror for the first time and saw that
>
> Chorus
> I am not my hair
> I am not this skin
> I am not your ex-pec-tations no no (hey)
> I am a soul that lives within…

While the discussion of hair may seem frivolous to some, all one has to do is walk on an urban high school campus and see the scarves and hair weaves and extensions on AAFAs heads to come to the realization that hair is an important element of AAFAs identity

within the black community.

Although some AAFAs may struggle with society's and their own concept of beauty, the overall self-concept tends to be positive among AAFAs, as opposed to other ethnic groups in the adolescent stage of development, particularly in the early stages of adolescence ages 11 to 14. According to Belgrave (2009), the attitudes and self-concepts of early adolescence tend to be positive across several factors such as appearance, confidence, and academic achievement. However, in the adolescent phase from ages 14 to 17, there may be a shift in this self-concept, which would explain the issues affecting AAFAs in urban high schools. Nonetheless, it appears that the AAFAs have more of a challenge within the adolescent period of life than do other female adolescents from other ethnic groups.

Self-image in AAFAs may have further implications as a result of race and gender. The theory of *Intersectionality* provides a foundation to analyze the effects of gender and race as an axiom. The theory of *Intersectionality* points to certain factors of race merging with gender to create issues, such as AAFAs body type and hair images that are unique to AAFAs, the relationship and image of AAFAs' mothers and the role that plays in self-definition. I will discuss this further in the Theoretical Framework section. The role and perception of the African American male, specifically the father is a part of self-image for AAFAs and serves to impact her.

When Gender and Race Collide

Often AAFAs and young women of color face obstacles at multiple intersections in life that other students may not encounter. Furthermore, research often neglects the multitude of ways that young women of color are marginalized (Leadbeater & Way,

1996). Although there has been important research conducted on the adolescent female, it has mainly focused on white female adolescents and their struggle with gender. Studies have found that race and ethnic identity in adolescents were significant and could not be simplified in studies as either race or gender many influences had to be factored in such as economic status, language, family, peers, and historical contexts that play a role in the development of adolescent females. Simply, there is no simple method.

The perceptions of AAFAs vary; what may be seen as normal adolescent behavior in the home may be perceived as unruly behavior at school. According to Leadbeater and Way (1996), "A girl's self-regard does not develop in a social or cultural vacuum. The gender roles, expectations and relations that prevail in one community do not necessarily map well into roles, expectations, and relations in another community" (p. 61). Some AAFAs in urban high schools can be perceived to be too loud and overt in their voice and behavior. Often this perceived loud, overt behavior may not garner effective interaction and/or assistance from some school personnel. Conversely, AAFAs may become so quiet that they receive no attention at all. Stevens (2002) explains that "Black female adolescents develop skilled, unique, expressive and assertive styles of relating as a way to negotiate perceived hostile environments" (p. 61). Some AAFAs in urban high schools contend with many factors such as race, low test scores, economic status, urban dwelling, foster care, and/or single parent homes in addition to the adolescent phase of development.

The realization that there are many other issues affecting their lives becomes clear to the AAFAs at an early age. In addition to negotiating the turbulent waters of adolescence, the AAFA's must negotiate all other social issues affecting her life and the

lives of those around her. Moreover, Erikson (1968) states, "Students realize at this juncture that it is their race and cultural background that determine their status in school instead of their desire to be a student" (p. 112). Identifying as a student may be challenging for AAFAs when gender and ethnic identity have yet to be defined and/or accepted in the home, school, and community. Collins (2009) asserts, "Although schools would like to think of themselves as racially accepting of black women the truth is they perpetuate the controlling perceptions of black females such as sexually overt and physically aggressive" (p. 127). Gender and race collide in the AAFAs, which may be reflective of U.S. historical and societal norms such as racism, sexism, and classism; AAFAs must learn to negotiate social factors and oppressive definitions if they are to endure in their homes, schools, and communities. Collins (2000) shares that "Black women's ability to forge these individual, often unarticulated, yet potentially powerful expressions of everyday consciousness into an articulated, self-defined, collective standpoint is key to Black women's survival" (p.40). AAFAs self-definition in all areas of life: self-image, family construct, sexuality and race, that the AAFAs can be empowered to breakthrough stereotypes and claim her own identity.

Resiliency and Resistance are Critical

According to Webster's dictionary resistance can be defined as not damaged by something and resiliency can be defined as the ability to recover quickly from setbacks. Multiple authors document the resistance and resiliency of AAFAs as they must negotiate sociopolitical challenges. As noted by hooks (2005), "AAFAs must learn about the strategies in which to live and survive in a world of racism, sexism, class, exploitation, homophobia, and many other dominant societal structures which impede the knowledge

of self" (p. 132). Resistance and resiliency are often the tools used to disregard what schools and institutions perpetuate about the behavior and attitudes of AAFAs. Often AAFAs will consciously disagree and disregard any validation by authority in an effort to define themselves. According to Lopez (2003), "The negative perceptions of minority women in urban educational settings as sexualized or immoral was an influence in attaining educational success in an effort to defy this perception" (p. 56). Resisting the stereotypes is an effort to self-identify.

Resisting can come in two forms for AAFAs. According to Robinson and Ward (1991), the first is resistance for survival, which involves short-term answers such as blaming racism or family conditions for not achieving goals. The second resistor is "resistance for liberation" (p. 12) which involves long-term answers such as being true to oneself and telling the truth in the face of racism and adversity. This form of liberation or resistance usually is taught by parent and family members who have a strong sense of ethnic identity and who have successfully negotiated social and political barriers.

Therefore, when teachers, counselors, and administrators have an expectation of certain types of behavior from adolescent females, they may be in direct opposition to what AAFAs have been taught at home or in their community, which can create conflict. According to Morris (2007), "Many teachers encouraged these girls [AAFAs] to exemplify an ideal docile form of femininity, emblematized in the prescription to act like ladies" (p. 490) .This idealized form of behaving presents a serious problem for AAFAs. According to Collins (2009), "Beliefs and worldviews produced by elite groups stand in complex relationship to racism, sexism, and similar systems of domination" (p. 8) .These girls are often placed in a no-win situation because they have already been labeled as

special concerns on campus because of several normative factors such as low test scores, economic status, urban dwelling, foster care, and/or single parent homes.

Many urban-dwelling AAFAs are exceedingly aware of their social and ethnic standing, which can ultimately place them in a lesser category in school. As Stevens (2002) stated, "female adolescents of color must learn to navigate hostile environments while developing personal and cultural integrity" (p. 55). Added to the social issues that AAFAs encounter are their nonconforming behaviors—resilient behavior that can often be disguised as a bad attitude or inappropriate behavior. Consistent with Stevens for Black adolescents, the journey of self-discovery involves constructing an identity as a member of a socially devalued racial ethnic group. Most important, if not properly channeled, cultural resistance for Black youth can go awry and be maladaptive. Therefore, AAFAs must be taught about their cultural value, African American womanhood, and, moreover, effective resilient behaviors.

The resilient behaviors that AAFAs display are in an effort to defy the negative stereotypes that, in fact, some may be displaying. For example, an AAFAs may see her talking back as a way to stand up for herself. According to hooks (1999), "Talking back meant speaking as an equal to an authority figure; it meant daring to disagree and sometimes it just meant having an opinion" (p. 5). In some instances, talking back can be viewed as a form of resistance; sometimes it is culturally relevant that AAFAs stand up for themselves by talking back. However, as Stevens (2002) pointed out, this form of resistance may be inappropriate if not used in a proper context and/or setting. Often this type of resistance is a detriment for AAFAs, as it sets the stage for confrontation with authority that may in fact have their best interest in mind.

The sociopolitical issues concerning AAFAs and the perceived negative behaviors that are sometimes exhibited by them are often symptomatic of the totality of the effects of poverty and the hopelessness and despair that poor, urban economic conditions can produce. According to Ruffolo, Sarri, and Goodkind (2004), "Adolescent girls from racial and ethnic minority groups living in impoverished conditions are disproportionately represented in the juvenile justice system" (p. 237). Further, the problem is not simply an issue of the negative behaviors of AAFAs; it is the problem of impoverished urban communities with high unemployment rates, neighborhoods infested with gangs. In addition communities are without social programs, cuts in government programs, blatant drug use in local streets and homes, domestic violence, lack of parental involvement, all of these elements which young girls experience, rolled into one, can lead to a critical struggle to survive. Often at-risk African American girls see fighting as a way of survival. According to the U.S. Department of Juvenile Justice (2008):

> When girls fight in schools, they may do so as a result of teacher labeling, in self-defense, or out of a general sense of hopelessness. Girls in disadvantaged neighborhoods are more likely to perpetrate violence against others because of the increased risk of victimization (and the resulting violent self-defense against that victimization), parental inability to counteract negative community influences, and lack of opportunities for success. (p. 12)

The ability to function under these debilitating circumstances is remarkable. The ability to learn under these debilitating circumstances is difficult at best.

Therefore, the need for some type of intervention or programming that educates AAFAs as to the appropriate resistant behavior would be important. This form of

resistance can be seen as aggressive and disrespectful in the eyes of teachers who may not know the cultural relevance of talking back. It is in direct benefit to the AAFAs to be able to extract resources in their own community and to develop strong alliances in that community as a method of survival (Leadbeater & Way, 1991). While many may not see the benefit of the 'hood, it is the reality in which many urban AAFAs have to negotiate their existence on a daily basis: Leadbeater and Way, (1991) argue,

> One can argue that a girl's ability to rely on others, to access knowledge and
> resources in her community and to cultivate a support network are just as
> important in enabling her to be persistent in the face of adversity. (p. 55)

Resistance and resiliency are two components that, if applied properly, will assist AAFAs in the turbulent years of adolescence. However, it is in the application of these components that AAFAs in urban high schools would benefit from some type of intervention program. Resistance and resiliency for AAFAs in schools can often be viewed as disobedience and aggressive, particularly to teachers or administrators who are naturally seeking to control the school environment. It is the control of the overall environment that teachers and administrators may not recognize what researchers and experts in the field of Black women (Belgrave, 2009; Collins, 2009; Stevens, 2002) have deemed crucial which is a need for AAFAs to have resistance and resiliency as a form of empowerment and as a vehicle to survival and ultimately success. However, the proper use of resiliency and resistance must be taught to AAFAs from someone who has successfully used these tools to define, negotiate and claim his/her space/place in the world. The teaching of effective resistant and resilient strategies for AAFAs in urban communities may come from interventions that work to provide those lessons.

Interventions That Work

The literature indicates that there are several key components of high effective intervention programs for African American female adolescent students. These effective interventions include engaging youth in transformative programs that are culturally relevant, led by a consistent and caring adult mentor or team, focus on interpersonal relationships and self-esteem, and representative role models.

Recently, there have been two significant studies that implement intervention programs that specifically address the unique challenges and needs of AAFAs in urban schools. The first study examined by Thomas, Davidson, and McAdoo (2008) is the Young Empowered Sisters Program that analyzed the impact of an intervention on "African American identity, racism awareness, collectivist orientation, intentions to participate in liberatory youth activism" (p. 286). The study showed a positive effect on its variables. It emphasized cultural awareness through the Nguzo Saba, which is a set of principles and values that emphasizes an African theme. The seven principles utilized are:

1. *Umoja* (Unity): To strive for and to maintain unity in the family, community, nation, and race.

2. *Kujichagulia* (Self-Determination): To define ourselves, name ourselves, create for ourselves, and speak for ourselves.
3. *Ujima* (Collective Work and Responsibility): To build and maintain our community together and make our brothers' and sisters' problems our problems, and to solve them together.

4. *Ujamaa* (Cooperative Economics): To build and maintain our own stores, shops, and other businesses and to profit from them together.

5. *Nia* (Purpose): To make our collective vocation the building and developing of our community in order to restore our people to their traditional greatness.

6. *Kuumba* (Creativity): To do always as much as we can, in the way we can, in

order to leave our community more beautiful and beneficial than we inherited it.

7. *Nia* (Faith): To believe with all our heart in our people, our parents, our teachers, our leaders, and the righteousness and victory of our struggle. (Karenga, 2008)

The Young Empowered Sisters study was implemented in the Midwest, in a semi urban high school in which there were two groups, each composed of 38 Afri*c*an American females. One group received the intervention and the other did not. While the results were positive for the group that received the intervention, that group also focused on themes outside of the Nguzo Saba, specifically, racism, strategies to confront racism, and academic achievement. Moreover, there appeared to be personal experiences that were shared among participants and relationship-building experiences that contributed to the success of the intervention.

Culturally relevant interventions. According to Thomas et al. (2008) and Belgrave (2009), the needs for culturally relevant interventions for adolescents of color are critical if the interventions are to be effective. In addition, Thomas et al. assert,

Historically, youth development interventions have largely taken a universal approach to prevention, whereas white middle class values are emphasized. However there is growing recognition that universal programs may not be applicable to, or effective with youth of color. (p. 304)

It appears that in addition to culturally relevant intervention programs, the facilitator of the program must be prepared to address subtopics such as racism, sexism, and classism that may come up as a result of implementing culturally relevant materials.

Caring adult mentors. A second study evaluated by Belgrave et al. (2004) entitled the Sisters of Nia Project looked at using a culturally relevant intervention for

AAFAs. This study assessed how an intervention program could increase "resiliency among African American adolescent girls using a gender specific, relational, and cultural focus" (p. 135). The Sisters of Nia intervention differed from the Young Empowered Sisters program by specifically utilizing gender-specific curriculum that focused more on the self-esteem of the girls in addition to culturally relevant themes. Moreover, the Sisters of Nia intervention took a relational approach, as the literature suggests that relationships are key to working with not only at-risk youth, but with AAFAs particularly (Collins, 2000, 2009; Gilligan, 1982; Stevens, 2002) . Having a positive relationship with a caring adult is a significant factor in interventions for African American females.

The research was designed to address both gender and culture through the lens of self-esteem in relation to having a positive ethnic identity. As Belgrave , Chase-Vaughn, Gray, Addison, and Cherry (2000) state, the program was created "to affect several outcome variables by providing interventions that increase girls' positive feelings about self (self-esteem) and enhance a strong sense of culture (ethnic identity and Afrocentric values) and both masculine and feminine beliefs" (p. 135). These efforts instill in the girls a greater sense of personal and cultural pride that would translate into a better self-perception.

Interpersonal relationships. The Sisters of Nia case study suggests that interpersonal relationships are particularly important for African American adolescent girls. It goes on to describe how important relationships are in the interventions when working with AAFAs and how the study sought to provide for relationship building during the research. Belgrave et al. (2000) stated, "This intervention sought to increase bonding and mutually empowering relationships between girls and their peers, as well as

girls and female role models through relational, gender-focused activities" (p. 136). Often urban AAFAs have struggled in their homes and communities with establishing and maintaining significant gender-specific role models and friendships. Intervention programs such as this assist in this crucial effort.

Culturally relevant youth development interventions that promote cultural assets can offer an empowering experience for participating youth. They offer youth the opportunity to learn about their sociopolitical environment in relation to race and racism.

Representative role models. Mentors and role models were also a commonality in the case studies. They emphasized that the race of the interventionist was critical to the deployment of the intervention and of great necessity to the relationship-building dynamic needed to implement the intervention. Although the studies found the race of the interventionist critical, it is important to mention that cultural awareness training for educators who are not of the particular race of the intervention group may be helpful in supporting or leading a group. As noted by Stevens (2002), AAFAs learn much of their cultural and socialized behaviors from their mothers and others in their families and communities. However, what could be equally as important are counselors, teachers, and social workers if they were culturally knowledgeable and empathic about this population. However, cultural awareness training for educators is lacking in public schools where emphasis is placed on training teachers for standards-based and performance testing.

These problems make it almost impossible to address adequately the specific needs of AAFAs in public schools. Adequate cultural knowledge starts with the knowing of theories and frameworks that address the specific population that is being targeted. Second, and just as significant, is the collaboration with professional members of the

targeted population for a better understanding and clarity in working with AAFAs (Corneille, Ashcraft, & Belgrave, 2005). This is where cultural relevancy combines with research to gain a more insightful pathway that will be most beneficial to the population being served.

Effective AAFAs Intervention Programs Need to be Research Based

Moreover, the numerous educational remedies used as interventions in working with urban African American students have led to the current dismal academic state of urban African American students. The educational interventions aimed at making a difference have included the efforts of numerous programs such as Character Counts, Conflict Resolution, and D.A.R.E. These interventions, while appropriate and effective with other students, have not shown results in many urban AAFAs. However, there are other interventions that have showed promise and results in working with urban AAFAs. Some of these interventions utilize a component that provides a safe place for AAFAs to discuss, share, and learn about problems, concerns, hopes, and dreams that impact their lives. This study examines the SC Program and several other similar intervention programs and discusses and compares their intervention strategies.

Educators and researchers are seeing the importance and benefits of cultural interventions. According to Kemper, Spitler, Williams and Rainey (1999):

The literature describing programs successful in promoting the transition of African American youth from adolescence to adulthood reveals that a key characteristic of these programs has been their ability to reflect the cultural and social norms of the communities in which they were implemented. (p. 14)

Government agencies, schools, and organizations that have had experiences in working

with this population are starting to take notice in regard to the positive effects of

culturally relevant programs (Nelson et al., 1991). Increasingly, research points to

culturally relevant interventions as effective tools for working with students with special

needs. The awareness and self-esteem that these programs may offer AAFAs may be far

more effective and cost effective than special education referral or juvenile justice system

entry.

Cultural identity is important to how people see themselves and how they

communicate. Culture has the power to exclude or include individuals. Among AAFAs in

an urban school, there are often a few perceptions: one is to belong to the school's culture

and another is to be an outsider. Although we live our lives in these different structures, it

is often difficult for someone who has a different social and cultural environment to

identify with someone who does not know or may not care about the social and political

issues in their homes and communities. Cultural relevancy becomes critical to someone

in crisis because, more than anything, the person in crisis needs to know how much you

care before she needs to know how much you know. When working with African

American girls, research has shown the importance of cultural relevancy. According to

Kemper et al. (1999) their review of youth service programs showed three factors that are

necessary for successful intervention programs for young people:

    (a) existence of a sense of community,

    (b) a shared vision between the community and intervening organization, and

    (c) the existence of a positive culture within the community. (p. 2)

Having consideration for the cultural composition of the community is a factor in

gaining the confidence with the participants of the intervention program.

Often the disregard or unintentional deletion or misrepresentation of cultural principles while working with African American at-risk girls acts as an impediment to the development of self-efficacy. Cultural relevancy is a vital supportive factor in the positive development of youth in their self-efficacy (Bandura, 1994). Understanding who you are, where you come from, and successes and challenges of those who have similar backgrounds can often lead to a more productive life. Assuredly, there is no attempt to imply that only African American interventionist can work with at-risk African American girls; however, research has shown that culturally relevant groups often implemented by the indigenous group have had success in working with at-risk youth from the specific culture. AAFAs who survive the issues of broken homes, abandonment, poverty, rape, drug abuse, unavailable parents, aging grandparents, extended family collecting checks for their existence, and still make it to school are survivors. Often when these survivors make it to school, they have nothing left emotionally, spiritually, or academically, and often they demonstrate behavior that may be survival or resilient, which is perceived as negative and inappropriate for school. Interventions offer an initial ray of hope that may be used as a tool in working with African American females in urban high schools. What is consistent throughout the literature related to effective intervention programs for AAFAs is the need to meet AAFAs where they are: emotionally, socially and academically. Another indispensable factor is empathy combined with the ability to interchange and exchange ideas pertinent to their development. Stevens (2002) describes her method of intervention as "…the person-process-context model to mean that feature of existence where persons are constantly making up self-defining practices to meet the demands of daily living" (p. 31). Collins (2009) refers to safe places as a way of

intervening in the lives of AAFAs and Belgrave (2009) discusses the need for friendship and sisterhood.

Collectively, the research for AAFAs intervention programs utilize three basic tenets; empathy from a caring adult, sisterhood with each other and a safe place to culturally, emotionally and socially communicate about their experiences in their lives and to develop strategies to successfully negotiate their environment.

Theoretical Framework

Black Feminist Thought provides a theoretical lens best suited for this study; Black Feminist Thought among other things is the act of self-definition. There are and have been many African American writers who contributed to the self-defining movement of Black Feminist Thought: Audre Lorde, Zora Neale Hurston, Patricia Hill-Collins, and bell hooks. Black feminist theory provides a foundation of knowledge that can be applied to the AAFAs and interventions and strategies in working with AAFAs; the theory provides important historic knowledge to present-day theory. Much of what has been researched about AAFAs has used conventional theories that often leave out relevant historic, social, and emotional factors that are at the root of the problems and issues that directly impact AAFAs presently. Black feminist theory is written by and for Black women. The theory relies heavily on personal accounts of social and emotional development through adolescence and onto womanhood. This theory fills the gap that traditional researchers could not fill in the Black community in the 1960s.

The Black community was often off limits to outside researchers, based on fear of being harmed and the deficit model traditionally used by outsiders to characterize the Black community (Stevens, 2002). Moreover the 1960s and 1970s produced significant

African American female artists, such as Maya Angelou, Alice Walker, Nikki Giovanni, Toni Morrison, and Angela Davis telling their stories through a variety of creative forms such as: music, novels, poetry, and the spoken word. This study leans on Collins' (2000) theory of *Intersectionality* as an additional lens that brings gender and race to an axiom that places in perspective the unique population of the African American female. By incorporating *Intersectionality*, the I researcher collected and analyzed AAFAs participants using both gender and race individually and collectively. Additionally, this conceptual framework may have further implications for programmatic decisions in educational settings. The theoretical significance of using both Black feminist and *Intersectionality* theories will assist in conceptualizing this study. ; Black feminist theory combines gender and race in historic and present-day worlds to garner a deeper insight in to the development of the AAFAs and their experiences in school, home, and the community at large. Therefore, intersecting with race, gender, social status, and current and historic factors created a foundation for analyzing AAFAs and interventions that may be successful in working with this population. Moreover, and simply, this study incorporates both theories of Black feminist thought and *Intersectionality*, which provided a structural guide in analyzing and organizing the data.

     Black Feminist Thought as a grounding theory to examine is a logical and pragmatic decision as it serves as a foundational basis of knowledge. The perceptions of AAFAs and the interventions or strategies in working with AAFAs are historically and intrinsically tied to the theory of Black feminism. Although the Women's Movement and theories that support it and critical race theory would be applicable, neither combines both race and gender in a significant manner that addresses the African American

woman's experience. Roth (2004) defines the plight of feminism as it pertains to the

Black women and White women. She ascertains that the feminist movement of White and

Black women occurred simultaneously, but separately. Given the intersection of race and

gender, Black women's struggle toward equality had to be twofold, whereas White

women had the luxury of focusing primarily on gender equality. Consistent with Collins

(2000) Black women argued that White feminists failed to recognize that gender

oppression, combined with race and class oppression, shaped the lives of women of color

and, indeed, that White women often benefited from race and class privilege. Given the

disparity in the women's movement, Black women had to find a way to be heard; this has

been the struggle throughout the ages.

The inequity in the women's movement suggests Black women are best suited to

define themselves. Stewart articulated that the power to self-define was critical to the

Black woman. Collins (2000) quoted Maria Stewart's 1831 statement thus:

> "O, ye daughters of Africa, Awake! Awake! Arise! No longer sleep or slumber,
>
> but distinguish yourselves." Maria Stewart was a black feminist, educator, author,
>
> activist and orator.… She encouraged black women to self-define and rely upon
>
> themselves. Stewart recounted the non-punishable physical and sexual abuse at
>
> the hands of whites. "Oh America, America, foul and indelible is thy stain!"
>
> (p. 246)

It is through self-definition that African Americans have survived the social and political

polarities in the United States. Slavery in America has indelibly left its mark; it will

forever be the stain in the fabric of America. The peculiar institution of slavery and the

legally sanctioned discrimination of America's history have permanently removed the

ancient practices and moral African tradition of its women (Du Bois, 1903). Simply, the experience of the Black female in the United States has been forever shaped and cemented by the historical treatment given her in this country.

The mere survival of female African slaves leaves a legacy of resiliency for contemporary African American women. Although the subject of slavery is not the focus of the theoretical framework being discussed, certain facts bear mentioning. Stevens (2002) stated, "The roots of black feminist theory are grounded in the survival of Black women who survived the middle passage from Africa to the Americas, the brutal enslavement, rape, and the dismemberment of families" (p. 32). Survival and resiliency are the foundational beliefs on which Black womanhood is exacted; these strong belief systems have intrinsically intertwined the Black woman in America's social and historical fabric. According to Collins (2000):

> The legacy of resiliency for Black women lived in America as a force that would quietly reconstruct a nation, desegregate schools, clean and take care of white women and kids while raising their own black women are not only resilient they are survivors. (p. 59)

While not entirely a part of the Women's Movement, Black women still participated in and, in some cases led the fight for equal rights. One of the most obvious examples of Black women leading and supporting the cause for equality is Rosa Parks, who is known as the mother of the Civil Rights Movement for not giving up her seat on the bus in 1955. As women started to write and recall women's struggle, somehow the issue of race disappeared from the educational research and contemporary writing. The fight for equality in terms of race was that of Black men being equal; Black women were

viewed as supporters. Consistent with hooks (2000) many Black women benefited from neither the race nor the Women's movement and there were issues of class and gender that permeated the lives of women of color.

The discussion of equality for both race and gender coalesces in the experience of Black women. Gilligan (1982), in her research, discusses the different voices of men and women and how they speak to each other. Gilligan looks at the interaction and connections men and women make in relationship to times of conflict and change. She further mentions that her research is not inclusive of ethnic populations over time.

In most educational research and literature that addresses the issue of equality; the discussion is often limited to either race or gender. By limiting the discussion to either race or gender, the total experience of the Black woman is difficult to analyze. The Black woman in her totality can become irrelevant or invisible. By using the perception of either-or when applied to Black women, this can be seen as a tactic that was premeditated to minimize and ultimately control the perceptions and image of Black women. Further, Collins (2000) details that there are mainly three reasons why the oppression of Black women existed in the United States: (a) to use the Black woman as a worker in the fields, (b) to profit economically from the work, and (c) to cement the image of the Black woman as a service worker. Historically, these motivations were the bases for the political and social oppression of Black women in the United States.

Given the historic images of the Black woman in the United States and the absence of African American women in the Women's Movement, there was little in research and/or contemporary literature that documented the lives of African American females. There was an intellectual and literary void; out of this empty space was born

much of what is the self-defining Black feminist theory that has given voice to authors such as Maria Stewart, Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, W.E.B. Du Bois, Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, bell hooks, and Patricia Hill-Collins. Without these authors, activists, artists, and historians, the story and the self-definition of the African American female experience in the United States would have been lost.

Whereas the review of literature has influenced the application of the theoretical framework employed in this research so has the theoretical framework influenced the development of the research questions. The research questions ask the participants their perceptions about their academic, social and emotional development as it pertains to an intervention program in and out of the school environment. Theoretically speaking, Black Feminist Thought is most concerned with self-definition. Secondly, the research questions ask adult school personnel to offer their perceptions about the academic, social and emotional development of the participants in the intervention program. In asking for the perceptions of adult school personnel I am asking for the institutional and societal perceptions of AAFAs. These perceptions are often oppressive and limiting regarding AAFAs which would further speak to the theory of Black Feminist Thought which describes and details institutional and structural constructs in schools, churches and communities that encounter AAFAs.

Chapter III: Research Design and Methodology

The following is a description of the research design and methods that were used to conduct this qualitative case study. This study examined the SC as an intervention program and answered the following research questions:

- How do SC members perceive that the intervention has influenced their academic, social, and emotional development?

- How do SC members perceive that the intervention influenced their behavior and attitude in and out of school with peers, parents and school personnel?

- How do teachers and counselors perceive the SC has influenced AAFAs students at Central High School?

These research questions were the guiding foundation that examined the SC intervention program. The interviews sought to gain insight into the participants' perceptions about the intervention program and how, if at all, the intervention program affected the participants' lives academically, socially, and emotionally. Similarly, teachers and counselors were interviewed to better understand the impact of the SC on the student participants. The review and coding of the researcher's weekly notes further validated the experiences of the participants in the SC.

Rationale

This research project employed a qualitative case-study approach to investigate the research questions listed above. Stake (2005) concludes that research questions change as the research is being conducted and that the initial questions are a guide to frame the study. Certain questions will become extraneous, others will morph, and others may distinguish themselves as most relevant to the case study; however, the study was

structured using the original research questions. The design of this case study allowed

participants to reflect on their current and past experiences within the intervention

program. Furthermore, Stake states that the case study is alive and operates "in the now"

(p. 17); it meets with challenges and has a unique identity. Included in the characteristics

of the study is the vision for the future of the program while taking into account that the

present is what was being observed and researched. For example, although this study is

examining an intervention program and the effect on academic, social, and emotional

development of its participants, multiple other factors emerged during the data analysis;

such as the resiliency of participants factoring as a variable in their development.

Moreover this study was an examination of a specific population in a particular urban

high school setting. This is a knowable population that is not known (Yin, 2003). Case

studies can reveal a need to understand unique social groups. AAFAs in urban high

schools that require an intervention program can be categorized as a unique social group;

to better understand this population and provide the needed intervention is what compels

this study.

Design

The designation of a case-study design was to examine both the Sister Circle

program and its AAFA participants. According to Creswell (2009), "Case studies

examine programs, activities, comprehensively usually within a specific time frame while

utilizing several forms of data collection over time" (p. 27). This research design

involved constructing a qualitative case study that incorporated multiple strategies of data

collection: (a) interviews with 15 SC participants, (b) follow up interviews with 4 focal

students, (c) interviews with 6 adult participants, and (d) review of weekly reports.

Although there were up to 25 members of the SC the participants of study was made up

of the SC members that attended consistently. The school personnel included program

participants, the 15 student teachers, counselors, and administrators who have been

directly involved in the intervention program for the past 2 years. The review and coding

of the researcher's weekly reports, or extant data, was analyzed to interpret if the weekly

reports had common themes/ideas that could be categorized in three main areas:

academic, social, and emotional development. The interviews served as a primary source

of data and the weekly reports give historical, documented information as to the

development of the intervention program and its participants. Figure 1 is a representation

of the research design.
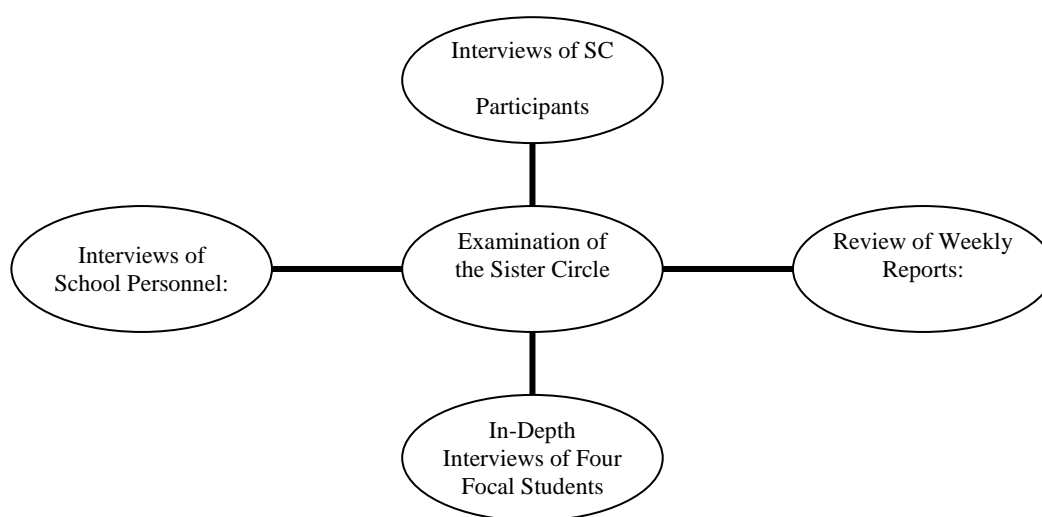
Figure 1. Data retrieval graph.

The figure depicts how data collection will be used to examine the intervention program.

Site. The SC program took place at Central High School with a population of

1,972 students and is located in an urban, working class community.   The student

population includes the following ethnic demographic breakdown: 89.2% Latino and

9.2% African American and 87% of the students qualify for the Federal Free and

Reduced Lunch Program. Academically, less than 53% of the students scored proficient or above level for the state exam (California Department of Education, 2010). The suspension rate for Central High School has been more than 20% since 2005, when it reached an all-time high of 27%. The latest data for 2008–2009 indicate a drop to 18% in suspension rates. The largest number of suspensions was for AAFAs which constitutes the smallest population at the school (California Department of Education, 2010).

Central High School is located in a densely populated urban community. The median household income is less than $23,000 per year, much lower than the national average household income of $50,000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). The community was historically a burgeoning African American, middle-class community that boasted many jazz artists and nightclubs. It was known for producing such artists as Alvin Ailey, Dorothy Dandridge, and the Nicholas Brothers. Ralph J. Bunche, noted humanitarian and Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, was not only a part of the community; he attended Central High School in 1978. The school was well known historically for being a standout in academics as well as athletics, winning many state championships in consecutive years.

The 1980s and 1990s brought the onslaught of the drug epidemic and an urban flight that left abandoned neighborhood rife with gangs and drugs. Much of the community was blighted; no longer were there community events and centers to attend and neighborhoods became gang territories. The experiences within Central High School began to reflect the turf wars in the local community. Still today, the Central High School quad at lunch time is segregated racially by gang affiliation. The racial tension in the community was high and transitioned to the school. In 2005, Central High School was put on police lock down due to race riots involving Black and Latino students. The racial

tensions not only exist in the school, but the community as well. The dramatic shift in the racial demographics in the community was duplicated in the neighborhood schools. Were there was once a sense of Black pride throughout the school, the infusion of large numbers of Latino students, mostly from Mexico, led to a shift in school culture.

Further, female students experience additional tensions within the school. For example, if an African American female student crosses racial lines to date a Mexican boy or if a Latina dates an African American male, there may be violent confrontations and consequences on both sides. Moreover, the school reported the greatest number of violent acts is by and between AAFAs while this population is the smallest in size within in the school, the receive the largest number of discipline referrals. In this context, the SC was born as an intervention to interrupt existing patterns and to create new opportunities for the AAFAs at Central High School.

Who are the participants? The participants in this study will include 15 African American young women who attended Central High School and participated in the Sister Circle (SC) program for 2 years and school personnel familiar with the SC. The students ranged in age from 14 to 18 and they self-identified by race as African American, except for one participant who identifies racially as "mixed" (Latina and African American). They are all, based on their free and/or reduced lunch meal status eligibility, from a low socioeconomic background. Moreover, all participants, according to school records, were presently or have been, placed in foster care services. All the participants were referred to the SC program because of discipline referrals to the school's dean and/or counselor's offices for various behavioral problems such as fighting, disruptive behavior in classrooms, or perceived physically violent or sexually overt behavior toward peers

and/or teachers. Equally, all SC members were from the urban community where their daily existence included the negotiation of obstacles such as foster care placement, juvenile justice involvement, gang and drug violence/use, emotional trauma, low academic achievement, and little perceived support. See Table 1 for a detailed overview of the SC members.

Table 1

Demographic Data

Name	Grade	Ethnicity	GPA	DR	S (06–07)	S (08–09)
SC 1	9	AA	2.0	0	0	0
SC 2	9	AA	1.87	0	0	0
SC 3	9	AA	1.33	0	0	0
SC 4	10	AA	1.24	4	0	0
SC 5	10	AA	1.53	5	5	2
SC 6	11	AA	1.76	4	3	0
SC 7	11	AA	2.3	7	3	0
SC 8	11	AA	2.1	5	3	1
SC 9	11	AA	2.57	3	3	1
SC 10	11	AA	1.89	3	5	0
SC 11	11	AA	1.48	1	1	0
SC 12	12	AA	0.69	2	3	0
SC 13	12	AA	1.24	8	5	2
SC 14	12	AA and Latina	2.57	8	5	5
SC 15	12	AA	1.3	3	1	1

Note. SC = Sister Circle; GPA = Grade Point Average; AA = African American; DR = Discipline Referral; S = Suspension.

Adult participants. The adult participants will consist of 2 principals, 2 counselors, and 2 teachers, all of whom have worked at Central High School since the

inception of the intervention program. The reason for selection of these specific school personnel is all of the adults have had daily personal contact with the SC participants for various reasons, such as teacher and/or counselor student interaction, discipline referrals, and parental meetings since the beginning of the intervention program. These adults have valuable knowledge of each participant before and during the intervention.

Other teachers and staff members who may have had some interaction with students participating in the research were not selected to participate. Although they may have valuable information about the study and its impact, it is outside the scope of this particular research. However, it would be important in follow up studies to include others in the selection pool.

Focal student participants. Stake (2005) states that although one may research a case study, the phenomena of embedded mini-case studies will appear in relation to the main or whole case study. The premise being that, although I am interviewing 15 SC participants individually, inevitably several participants--by the nature of maturity, personality, and conformability level—will answer the questions with more detail and background. These individuals will create a mini-case study. Stake further elaborates that each qualitative case study rarely asks each participant in the same study the same question. He explains, "It is the fluidity of the interview that allows each participant to express individually their (sic) experience and story as uniquely as themselves (sic)" (p. 59). In other words, following the flow of the participants' answers to the questions will allow the participants to express their feelings in their own way instead of a formal question and answer session.

When the mini-case studies presented themselves, I asked those participants if

they were willing to meet and interview for more than one hour in order to retrieve and record more data. The four focal student studies that emerged provided a more profound look into the lives of participants and how their participation in the SC Program affected multiple facets of their lives. I interviewed all 15 SC students in this study, however I anticipated smaller mini-case studies emerging including a several focal students. The mini-case study was a more detailed version of the overall study; it allowed participants to further elaborate on the questions that were asked in the initial interview.

Data Collection

   Interviews of student participants. Interviews of student participants are one strategy used in the data collection process. The Student Interview Protocol was used as a data instrument. Further interviews were conducted when participants wanted to elaborate beyond the interview protocol. Each participant was given the opportunity to elaborate beyond the initial interview questions. The consent and assent forms had a requirement for signing if participants wanted to elaborate further (See Appendix B and Appendix C). Also included is the informed consent form required for participation in the study. (See Appendix D).

   The student interview questions correlate to research questions 1 and 2 (See Appendix E and Appendix F):

1. How do SC members perceive that the intervention has influenced their academic, social, and emotional development?

2. How do SC members perceive that the intervention influenced their behavior and attitude in and out of school with peers, parents, and school personnel?

Prior to the student interviews, a letter was sent home describing the study and the role of

the participants. In addition, parental consent and assent forms were distributed and collected prior to the interviews .The interviews were conducted for no more than one hour in duration. Interviews took place either at the school site, a neutral site, or at the participant's home or on the phone if that was the request of the participant. In an effort to assure a level of trust between the participants and the participants' parents , I accommodated the participants' and parental stipulations regarding location, time, and any other accommodations needed for the interviews. I tape recorded the interviews as well as utilized a laptop computer during the interviews to record the participants' responses to the interview questions and to take notes. Participants were offered light refreshments during the interview. The interview data was kept in the locked file cabinet in my home office.

The interviews were semi-structured to allow for free flow of information. According to Richards and Morse (2007), "The use of semi-structured interviews is appropriate when the researcher knows enough about the study topic to frame the needed discussion in advance" (p. 114). In addition, the semi-structured interviews left open the possibility of spontaneity that may, in fact, garner more insight. Interviews occurred on a weekly basis for 6 consecutive weeks. Some participants were eager to elaborate on their experience in the intervention process and were given the opportunity to contribute further in the research.

Interviews of school personnel. The interviews of the 6 school personnel—2 administrators, 2 counselors, and 2 teachers—was conducted using the School Personnel Questionnaire (See Appendix G) to answer research question, How do teachers and counselors perceive the SC has influenced the academic, social, and emotional behavior

of its participants? School personnel interviews took place after school at a designated time and location convenient to the teacher, administrator, and counselor's schedules. Interviews could occur after or before school. The interviews were tape recorded and I used a laptop for note taking. The interviews occurred in the teacher's classroom and/or the principal's conference room; the interviews were informally conducted on the school quad if it was the request of the school personnel participant. Additionally, the telephone was used if face-to-face interviews were not possible or not desired by participants. After the completion of the study, written notes and materials were stored in a locked cabinet in my home office. The consent forms specified that the data collected in the interview would be used as a part of the research. I provided light refreshment for the interviews and participants were asked if they would be available for more in-depth interviewing.

The rationale for the selection of these school personnel participants was their direct involvement with the creation and support of the intervention program and its participants over the two-year period. In addition they had daily interactions with many, if not all, of the participants and would be able to provide insightful information as to the participant's behaviors, academic, social, and emotional behavior in school. It was the focus of the interviews to derive the viewpoint of the school personnel participants as it pertains to the SC Program and the student participants.

Instrumentation

The literature review guided the development of the interview questions used in the interviews of the participants in the study. Relying heavily on the research conducted by Stevens (2002) and Belgrave (2009), interview were conducted utilizing 15 open-ended questions was developed. Further, the questions were reviewed by Faye Belgrave,

Ph.D. and Kris Marsh, Ph.D., who both have earned doctorates and are leaders in the

research of AAFAs and African American women in urban communities. Edits were

made to the questions and revisions submitted for clarification. The questions were then

pilot tested by a group of urban, high school, AAFAs not attending the school where the

study is being conducted in order to ensure language suitability and age appropriateness.

Extant Data — Review of Weekly Reports

The weekly reports, which are the personal property of the researcher, include

weekly reports from 2008-2011, also described as extant data. Out of 66 weekly reports

collected during this intervention, 18 were collected in 2008–2009, 24 in 2009–2010 and

24 in 2010–2011. The program began in December of 2008, which is why fewer reports

were collected than in following years. The number of reports includes days that school

was out because of holidays, testing, and summer break. In addition there were weeks

when the researcher could not attend because of scheduling conflicts.

The review of weekly reports occurred at my office and all proper names were

replaced with pseudonyms in the weekly reports. Revised weekly reports excluded any

references or names of people and places that might identify participants of the study.

The review of data was categorized in order to make sense of the data in context of the

study. The review and categorization of the weekly reports sought to address all three of

the research questions. Bogdan and Biklen (1998) have compared the review of weekly

reports to a large gymnasium of toys that must be categorized, which is to say they could

be sorted by size, color, function, age appropriateness, manufacture, and the list could be

increased. In review of the extant data, assuredly specific elements stood out such as

repeated topics, phrases, and/or experiences. The repetition or regularity of the words,

phrases, topics, or experiences assisted in the development of the coding system. The researcher had a predetermined coding system of categories, which included academic, social, and emotional development. Bogdan and Biklen state, "Some of the coding categories will come to you as you are collecting data" (p. 171). There are many different types of coding strategies that can be used such as context, situations, event, or relationship coding.

Data Analysis

For the purpose of this study, the use of process coding was utilized. Process coding consists of the researcher having observed a group throughout a period of time and, moreover, have viewed certain benchmarks, stages, and transitions that have occurred. Process coding is particularly useful in chronological studies, which proved to be vitally instrumental in coding the researcher's data that have been collected during the past two years. The process code categories used in examining the weekly reports consisted of academic, social, emotional, and development as categories. According to Stake (1995), coded data are obtained primarily from categories dividing a variable. These variables are a part of a broader categorization and will break down to smaller variables as the research is conducted. For example, the importance of education may be reported as one variable in the weekly reports, which would fall under the category of academic development. While examining the report, another variable that emerged was *teacher respect*, which fell under two categories of academic and emotional growth. Weekly reports helped to better understand the SC case study. Some researchers find the weekly reports are more storytelling than cold hard data. The work of Weis and Fine (2000) incorporated storytelling as a method of capturing the often silenced voices of

youth to capture stories "of success, resistance, and tenacity" (p. 250). Arguably these

weekly reports are a story that report on a case. Stake (1995) argues, "Case study

reporting is not simply storytelling" (p. 127). Stake outlines the process for case study

reporting as storytelling in three specific steps:

1. A chronological or biographical development of the case.

2. A researcher's view of coming to know the case.

3. Description of several major components (categories) of the case. *(*p. 127*)*

In addition to the researcher's coding of the weekly reports, the analysis was reviewed by

Dr. Faye Belgrave and Dr. Kris Marsh who validated the instrumentation for the

interviews. This was the process utilized to ensure accuracy of interpretation the review

and coding of the weekly reports.

Data analysis for the interviews was conducted after the conclusion of the

interviews. The researcher reviewed the Excel spread sheets of each participant and

formatted the interview documents of the students and school personnel participants into

a Word document. The researcher highlighted and summarized each participant's

interview for review by readers.

Data Management

The data management process for the interview involved transcribing the interview

responses using an Excel spread sheet with predetermined categories, adding additional

categories as needed in the interview. All interviews were audio recorded to ensure

accuracy and to allow the researcher to review for coding purposes. I utilized her laptop

computer to track responses in a database system using a spread sheet for each interview.

I reviewed the participant's answers given after each interview to ensure validity of

responses.

Analysis Procedure

The two outside reviewers (Belgrave and Marsh) utilized in this study to comment, review, and give feedback on the interviews and the coding of the weekly reports are both female, African American, Ph.D. scholars. Faye Belgrave is a researcher and a professor of Sociology at the University of Virginia. She frequently conducts studies about AAFAs for nationally funded, long-term research grant projects. She is a respected leader in the field and has studied AAFAs for the past 20 years. Kris March is a professor of Sociology at the University of Maryland and a social commentator on the issues facing African American women such as their living conditions, working-educational status, marital status, and family responsibilities. Dr. Belgrave and Dr. Marsh are experts in the field and donated their time as a professional courtesy to further validate my data analysis.

Protection of Human Subjects

The protection of human subjects in this research complied with all state and federal rules, guidelines, and laws. The study -received the approval and was under the direct supervision of Pepperdine University's Graduate School of Education and Psychology (See Appendix H), while adhering to and obtaining permission of the Los Angeles Unified School District's Committee on External Research and Review (See Appendix I).

Precaution was taken to ensure all identities of all participants were protected and if, at any time during the study, a subject did not wish to participate; there was no pressure to continue. All information that could possibly identify participants, school

location or any other personal reference was de-identified. Both consent and assent forms were required to participate in the study.

Institutional Review Board Approval

Prior to conducting this study, prior approval from two different intuitions was needed. The school district that governs Central High School required the researcher to obtain written permission from its Committee on External Research Review before initiating research that involved students and staff. The permission was granted. (See Appendix I). For all doctoral students conducting research involving human subjects, approval from Pepperdine University, Graduate School of Education and Psychology's Institutional Review Board is required. The application to conduct the research was submitted along with the approval from the Committee on External Research Review to the Institutional Review Board. Approval to conduct this research was granted. (See Appendix H).

Obtaining Consent

After receiving the approval to conduct research from both institutions and a letter of support from the school principal; these were attached to the parent/guardian consent and youth assent documents (See Appendix B and Appendix C). When meeting with the students and the guardians, the documents were explained and questions were answered at regularly scheduled meetings. I explained in age-appropriate language what the consent documents were, why the student's parent/guardian needed to know about the study in advance, and that she or her parents could agree or disagree to participate in the study. Additionally, each girl was informed that even though her parent/guardian gave permission, she could still decline to participate in the study. For those students who were

18 years of age, parent permission was not required; although, all students'

parents/guardians were informed of the students participation in the research, regardless

of age.

After the initial distribution of consent and assent forms, there were follow-up

phone calls or home visits made to each potential participant's parent/guardian to verify

receipt of consent and assent documents. The follow-up phone calls served as a safeguard

in verifying consent to participate in the study. Permission documents were not sent via

mail, as many of the participants move frequently and may or may not inform the school

of a new address.

Every precaution was taken to ensure security for the identity of the participants,

their personal information, and data shared for the purpose of this study. As the principal

investigator, I am the only person with access to the participant's personal information

such as names, ages, grades, discipline referrals, personal writing, parental/guardian

contact information, addresses, and phone numbers. The information was stored in the

locked file cabinet in my home office. During the data collection phase, all student

participants' data files (interviews, writings, and reports) were coded using pseudonyms.

As an additional precaution, all participants' data files were coded to protect the identity

of adult participants. The school was given a pseudonym to act as an additional

cautionary measure.

Collection of the consent and assent forms of student participants occurred over a

2-week period. Student participants were allowed to drop off consent-assent forms in the

mail box of the researcher in the main office of the school or to turn in consent/assent

forms at regularly scheduled SC meetings. Adult participants were sent the documents

via e-mail and consent forms were collected on the day of their scheduled interviews.

Interviews of the student participants were scheduled after school in the principal's

conference room. Some of the interviews of student participants occurred at their homes

and at a nearby park to accommodate the request of student participants and/or their

parents/guardians. Adult participant's interviews were scheduled and conducted after

school or on weekends at the home office of the researcher and at a local coffee shop.

Instrument Development

There were two different interview protocols developed and used in this study:

Student Interview Protocol (SIP) and School Personnel Interview Protocol (SPIP). The

Student Interview protocol (See Appendix J) was designed to address three major areas:

academic, social, and emotional behavior of the students who had participated in the

intervention program and how that behavior in those areas may have changed in and

outside of school as a result of participation in the intervention program.

For further validation of the instrument, the researcher relied upon the

professional opinion, critique, and edits of two experts in the field of education (Dr. Faye

Belgrave and Dr. Kris Marsh) to validate the open-endedness of the questions, to give

further feedback about the intended research questions, and if, in fact, the SIP and the

SPIP would extract the data needed to examine effectively the intervention

program.[1]After several drafts, conference calls, and face-to-face meetings, the final SIP

and SPIP were deemed valid instruments. The SIP was designed to examine the

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[1] Dr. Faye Belgrave is a professor at the University of Virginia and has researched and published extensively about African American adolescent female development. Dr. Kris Marsh is an associate professor at the University of Maryland and is a demographer whose publications detail the African American middle class with a focus on African American women.

perceptions of the members of the SC and if, in fact, they perceived the intervention program had impacted their lives academically, emotionally, and/or socially. The research sought to group the questions using the broad areas of academic, social, and emotional behaviors as the categories. The SIP consists of 14 open-ended questions and is illustrated in the coding of the SIP and SPIP and the correlation to the research questions.

Further, the questions were designed to elicit a story or a memory that would generate a perception about the intervention program. Qualitative data analysis and the use of open-ended questions are designed to extract the participant's responses in order to gather rich and meaningful data.

Data Collection

The data collection for this study involved three data collection processes: interviews of student and adult participants using interview protocols, mini and in-depth case studies of four participants and analysis of weekly reports. The following is a description of those processes. The first process involved developing and administering the interview protocols for both student and school personnel; the second involved in-depth interviews with four selected student participants; and the third process involved retrieving, organizing, and cataloging weekly reports, writings, and notes of the researcher.

Timeline for the Study

This study began March 1, 2011, and concluded on March 1, 2012. During this time, interviews of students, teachers, administrators, and counselors took place along with the review of weekly reports.

Bias Disclosure

As a researcher it is a natural function to take notes and collect data on an ongoing basis. As coordinator for an intervention program, I struggled to balance my multiple roles as a mentor and also as researcher dedicated during the research period. I tried to minimize bias by adhering to the plan of research as outlined for this study. Although interpretation can be biased, steps were taken to include other professional researchers as reviewers to minimize any perception or real bias that could occur. Further, it was the commitment of this study to be of the highest order of ethical research by honestly allowing the data collected to be unmitigated and fully represented.

Role of the Researcher

As the researcher on this project, I brought 20 years of educational experience working almost exclusively in urban communities. I have taught at the K-12 level and served in community colleges and universities in several different capacities, mostly directing federally funded programs such as Upward Bound and/or recruiting minorities to pursue higher education. I received my Bachelor of Arts from the University of Nevada-Reno in Speech Communications and later moved to New York City and received a fellowship to Fordham University to obtain my Master's degree in Education.

Throughout my educational and professional career, I have always informally, and now formally, worked with a group of African American women, young women, and girls. Through social networks, study sessions, and professional organizations, I sought out these women intentionally. I knew that I would derive a specific/unique sisterhood, support and encouragement from these individuals. My experience, both personally and professionally, has taught me to rely on others who have had similar experiences and to

give back to those who may need that same support and encouragement. Because of a sense of reciprocity, I am honored to work with the SC program at Central High School. My relationship to Central High School extends beyond the intervention program. Prior to starting the program, I served on a guiding board of advisors for the school. At that time, Central High School had several race riots. It persists as one of the lowest performing high schools in the school district and has a high dropout rate. My relationship with the participants of the intervention program takes on many roles. I serve as the coordinator for the program; I also performed many other duties outside the scope of the program such as academic advising, home visits, weekend tutoring, and referrals to outside agencies for serious family issues. In many ways, I am what Collins (2000) describes as an "other mother" (p. 48). In this role, I am a nurturer, provider, disciplinarian, counselor, and most of all, I am simply available.

I continued to meet and provide regular services to the young women of the program and on non-meeting days, conduct research. This drew a clear and distinct line for me as the researcher, but for the participants as well. They were informed on the days that the interviews will take place as well be given all appropriate permission slips and letters to be signed and returned granting permission for their participation.

Summary

This qualitative case study used three forms of data collection to examine the intervention program: (a) the interviews of both the students and school personnel participants, (b) the review of weekly reports which offered an overall examination of the SC Intervention Program, and (c) in –depth case studies of four participants. The interviews offered valuable insight from the participants as to the perceptions and effects

of the intervention. The review of weekly reports provided an examination of two years

of weekly reports. The reviewer's comments and feedback from coded weekly reports

assisted in determining themes and content of the data collected.

Chapter IV: Results and Analyses

The Influence of the Sister Circle

The Sister Circle (SC) is a program that aimed to aid in the development of the participants lives; academically, socially, and emotionally. The participants came to the program with various levels of need in each area. For example, some of the participants were academically far below basic, others were at basic, while two of the girls tested at grade level. Socially, some of the participants had developed all the skills that they needed to participate in school effectively while others had minimally developed in the area of social development to the degree that it negatively impacted their performance in school. Emotionally, some of the girls were withdrawn and others were aggressive and confrontational in class and with school personnel. Many of girls exhibited or displayed leadership qualities, such as standing up for themselves and others when they felt they had been treated unfairly; yet their actions seldom led to individual or collective transformation academically or socially. If leadership is defined as influence over others (Northouse, 2007), several participants exhibited extreme leadership in their social circles and in their neighborhood. All of them possess the characteristics to lead in a positive and transformative way. The characteristic that was immediately apparent was resiliency.

This chapter is structured to illuminate the influence of the SC intervention using four participants: Deidra, Nia, Yvette, and Rochelle. These participants and their detailed experience through the SC program over a 2½-year period were documented using the research questions as a guiding frame. More specifically, this study analyzed the impact of the Sister Circle on participants' academic, social, and emotional development between 2008 and 2011. The four focal students' experiences represent multiple

influences experienced by the larger Sister Circle group and serve to illuminate how the students made sense of their Sister Circle experience. Specifically, Chapter IV presents four focal case studies to illuminate the impact of the SC on the participants academically, socially and emotionally, Chapter IV presents a portrait of the SC program by triangulating multiple forms of data. The data set includes: the analysis of the weekly reports, interviews of participants (including staff and teachers), one-on-one meetings, field notes, student work. The adult participant reflections are embedded throughout the four mini-case studies.

This chapter documents the lived experiences of the SC students. First, I provide a general overview of the Sister Circle participants' academic, social, and emotion experiences. In each subsequent section, I present a more specific case study of each focal student's experience—academically, socially, emotionally—and an example of a transformative moment in the Sister Circle. I will define these terms briefly before I present the case study data. Although the study included 15 girls, the 4 focal students' experiences serve as a representative sample of the total participants. In Chapter V, I will provide a more in depth analysis of the data and present emergent themes gathered from the Sister Circle program research.

Like all high school students, the SC participants were classified academically by how they performed on annual statewide, subject-matter exams in their 8th grade year. Students are identified as far below basic, below basic, basic, proficient and advanced. When the SC began in 2008 at Central High School, one student was academically proficient across all coursework and no students were identified as advanced. One participant scored at a basic level in English and Math and all remaining students were at

the academic levels far below basic or below basic. This meant that most of the SC members entered high school taking remedial or developmental English or Math.

The Sister Circle students' emotional development represented the unique emotional challenges that African American females encounter. hooks (2005) explores emotional development in African American females as, "If we know love, we must first learn how to respond to inner emotional needs. This may mean undoing years of socialization where we have been taught that such needs are unimportant" (p. 104). The understanding and definition of SC member's emotional state and development must include a historical perspective in addition to family background, to adequately address their needs.

Social development is defined as the ability to interact with peers and school personnel in a manner not detrimental to the attainment of knowledge. For example, a SC participant's social development may include the basic personal/social skill set necessary to negotiate the world in which she lives in. Based on this definition, the basic social skills needed to negotiate the world that most of the SC members live would not be socially acceptable to the dominant culture. However, those skills would be vital to the SC member that lives in poverty, gang, and drug violence in the community (sometime in the home), and physical, mental and sexual abuse, perceived and/or real abandonment in the family and often in the school structure. Therefore, in order to survive this type of environment, the social skill set is counter to the social skill set needed to negotiate and participate effectively in a school and work environment.

The following is a portrayal of SC participants as represented by each focal student; Deidra, Nia, Yvette, and Rochelle. The following sections include direct quotes

that were obtained from personal communication with participants in the study.

Deidra

"I don't know why all of you in here telling this Sister Circle lady your personal business. All she about to do is report it to an agency."

Academic ─ Deidra's academic achievement is not reflective of her potential. Deidra passed the high school exit exam in the 10th grade, and she was on track to graduate when she entered the SC. Her 2.0 GPA was more reflective of a lack of motivation than her academic capability. As the Sister Circle coordinator, I often believed Deidra could do better if she were challenged and motivated inside and outside of class. Deidra was an average student, but her writing showed extreme promise. She had the ability to get her thoughts, feelings and ideas on paper and consistently grasped critical concepts and engaged in difficult conversations. Her ability to perform well *inside* school was often distracted by her life *outside* of school. She was a (former) gang member, smoked marijuana regularly, and had been in foster care for 16 years.

Deidra began the SC intervention as a junior. Originally, upon starting the SC, I was not interested in taking upperclassman as I wanted to have as much time as possible with the participants. However, by special request from the principal, I accepted Deidra. Although most of the SC members were freshman and sophomores, Deidra's accumulation of five discipline referrals in one semester more than qualified her for the intervention.

Deidra's family life has negatively impacted her studies. She has extremely strained relationships with her family, particularly her mother. In fact, Deidra asserted her independence and repeatedly discussed her dislike for authority. She often made

comments such as "I control my life" and "No one is going to control me; not my boyfriend, my mother, foster care, and certainly not a teacher who was only out to get a paycheck." She seemed to have a general dislike and distrust of authority figures. According to teachers and counselors who had encountered Deidra, "if you crossed or corrected Deidra, she would try her best to make your life in the classroom miserable." The SC was no exception.

I learned of Deidra's interest and talent in writing during our journal writing time in the weekly SC sessions. At the end of her first semester, Deidra asked me to help her with an extra credit paper so she could pass a class that she was failing. The content of the paper was excellent but the structure and grammar needed work. Surprised by the quality of the thoughtfulness in her paper, I questioned why she was failing the class. She responded, "I didn't really care until I started listening to you talking about doing well in school. It made me stop and think about my future." Discussions about the importance of school and her future were staples to our SC conversation. On one occasion a published, African American, female author led a writing workshop for the SC participants. The author guided the group through a seven step process for writing and many of the girls struggled. Deidra, however, was inspired and her writing ability caught the attention of the author. The author asked Deidra to be her assistant for the workshop. Deidra diligently assisted other girls to put their ideas and thoughts on paper and she appropriated the role of a teacher/ leader.

The author's acknowledgement of her academic abilities was a new experience and it boosted Deidra's self-esteem. Deidra often demanded respect and was accustomed to the admiration of SC girls because of her gang status, but never for her academic

performance. Observing Deidra's growth from her initial skeptical comments about the SC, to participating in her own academic, social, and emotional growth was remarkable. Her evolution into a positive role model and a leader amongst her peers continued throughout her tenure as a SC member.

Emotional — Deidra's mom had been out of her life for 15 years. Deidra's aunt (her mother's sister) raised her. In fact, her aunt picked Deidra up from the hospital two days after she was born, so she would not go into the foster care system. It was only in high school that Deidra's mom became reacquainted with Deidra. The resentment and issues with Deidra's mom are often at the core of Deidra's outburst. She was regularly angry with her mom; however, she saw her mother as a victim, unable to do anything about her own situation, and surely, unable/unavailable to assist Deidra with her coming-of-age issues. There has been no counseling, no family reunification plan, or no forgiveness of past hurts, harm, or abandonment issues.

However, Deidra did respect her estranged father. In one of her journal activities, she wrote: "My father is someone I can depend on. Although he isn't here, I take the time to talk him. It's as if he listens and hears what I have to say. He guides me in the right direction." It is unclear why Deidra respected her father, but had great difficulty negotiating many of the women in her life.

Deidra was a natural leader. In the initial stages of the SC, Deidra and I struggled to connect. Deidra was suspicious of the SC program and warned others in the group not "to tell their business." As with most of the students, it took time to develop trust with the group. Over time I shared with the group that I had experienced many of the same struggles as a young AAFAs that included drug use, family problems and low self-

esteem. As Stevens (2002) discusses in her work, I realized that self-disclosure is an especially effective method used to build trust and as a way of identifying with the population being served. Little did I know that my self-disclosure established a bond with the group and, in particular, Deidra.

Social — At the beginning of her senior year, Deidra arrived at the weekly SC meeting with a new tattoo of her boyfriend's name etched across her neck. The girls were really impressed. I, as the coordinator, was faced with a teachable moment. So as not to seem completely out of touch with the emergent tattoo culture—particularly in inner city neighborhoods—I proceeded carefully. I stated that although getting a tattoo was not necessarily a bad thing however, getting a tattoo on your neck is socially unacceptable in certain places of employment. I asked the girls, "Have you ever seen a teacher, doctor, or social worker with a tattoo on his/her neck?" Of course, this discussion took the delight away from Deidra's new tattoo. I also informed Deidra of a tattoo removal service if, and when, she was ready to get it removed. This moment symbolized the constant ebb and flow of Deidra's growing identity as a leader. As with many of the SC girls, Deidra swore undying love for her boyfriend whom she broke up with months later.

In her senior year, Deidra was hired as a docent at the African American History Museum. However, one of the requirements for Deidra to work at the museum was she must cover the tattoo. It was having the opportunity to be a docent at the museum, by her account, where she developed a better understanding of commitment and leadership. "I'm going to cover my tattoos but it doesn't change who I am." Deidra had to complete several steps in the application process to become a docent; an application to complete, a personal statement to write, interview to attend. I told her I would guide her through the

process, but I could not do it for her. On multiple occasions Diedra threatened not to complete the application process, yet, she would always come through in the end. Most impressively, when the interview arrived, Deidra ditched her very popular latest sneakers and found a way to buy appropriate interview attire. At some level, she expected I would complete the process for her and supply the clothes. I did not. Soon after, she was hired.

Emergence of a Sister Circle Student Leader

Resiliency and determination are the tools that made her a survivor of 16 years of foster care and resiliency and determination carried her through this process. Deidra illustrated her growth when she explained to the SC girls how to gain respect:

> You have to give respect to get it. I don't know why all of you are being disrespectful in front this Sister Circle lady. You should be trying to hear everything she (sic) telling you because it's true. You are going find yourself in a messed up situation if you don't get your life together. Just ask me, I'm struggling trying to graduate.

The second year of SC began, and Deidra started to discuss her plans for after high school. Deidra was barely on track to graduate high school. She began to realize the negative impact and how her options were limited if she did not graduate. It was as if all that had been said and done in the past year had become clear and she was on a deliberate mission to accomplish what seemed impossible. There were a several classes that needed to be made up in adult school in addition to numerous assignments in the current year.

Deidra's presence in the SC became a welcomed sight. Deidra's attitude and role in the SC changed dramatically. No longer was she an instigator or troublemaker. She became the "Sergeant at Arms". She dared anyone to interrupt, or disrespect the SC

coordinator or guest speaker. She would frequently admonish the other girls who would not conform to the social norms that had been set in the group. As Deidra's transformation occurred, I asked her what happened. Without missing a beat, she said "You cared and you came back." Research has shown (U.S. Department of Juvenile Justice, 2010) the presence of a caring adult is one of the four factors that have a dramatic impact on the resiliency of girls. She was determined to walk across the stage and graduate. Remarkably, she did graduate however; options were extremely limited without any 4-year college preparation, limited exposure to higher education, and lack of academic achievement. College acceptance options were relegated to community college status and, at home, the pressures to get a job loomed.

As a community resource, the SC partnered with the local African American museum as a way of infusing African American culture into the intervention program. The girls visited and attended numerous events several times throughout the first year. Through this partnership, the opportunity to become a young docent was presented to Deidra. It was on one of the many visits to the museum that the large personality of Deidra was noticed by the museum's Educational Director (ED). Although many of the other docents were academically far better prepared for the experience, the ED waved the GPA requirement and took a chance on Deidra. She was up for the task. The ED groomed and provided individual coaching and training that would be needed to prepare her to be a docent. The ED was willing to take Deidra on the condition that she would be on time, work hard, and cover her tattoos. The docent position and the support of the ED and the museum staff proved to be a growing and transitional period for Deidra.

When Deidra finished training for the docent program, the SC visited the museum to tour the new exhibits. Of course the tour was led by Deidra. The afternoon was spent in the museum's conference with Deidra as the guest speaker. The effect of having Deidra stand before the same group of girls as a docent versus standing in front of them with the ear buds in her ears was amazing. The level of intensity in the room could be felt as she began to describe her journey. It was like listening to a prominent speaker or a rock star. You didn't want to miss a single word of what she had to say. When Deidra began to speak she started by saying:

> I'm so grateful to the ED and the museum for allowing me a chance to be a docent, I know I wasn't the smartest one [docent] here, but I held my own. I also want to thank the SC because without it, I would have never had the chance. You just don't know what it [SC] means until it means something.

She went on to tell the girls that everything they were learning in school and at the SC was important because when they graduate and step into the real world, they have to become responsible to themselves. The girls listened like I had never seen them listen. It was as if Deidra had made it and there was hope.

Deidra is living at a friend's house and the friend's mom is charging her $100 per week to live there. Deidra's minimum-wage job at the museum barely covers her rent. She also reports that at the friend's house, her personal belongings are missing. After a few months there, Deidra was forced to reconcile with her mother and was allowed to move back home. They agreed on an amount Deidra would pay. However, shortly after moving home, Deidra reported that the mom was asking for money at all hours of the

night. The fear is she has started using drugs again. Recently, Deidra was laid off from the museum because of budget constraints.

Nia

"I need someone to pay attention to me and call me on my stuff."

Academic — Nia was an average student and her scores on the state standardized test placed her in regular courses. As a high school freshman, Nia wanted to be bused to school 30 miles from her neighborhood because she wanted "to be around different people." Unfortunately, by her own admission, Nia had difficulties fitting into the transfer school's culture. While attending that school she ditched classes consistently and had a few altercations with other students. Soon after, Nia was transferred back to her neighborhood school in the second semester of her freshman year. Her GPA upon arrival was a 1.2, but she placed in regular classes. Unlike most SC students, Nia's mother is a college graduate and Nia has an older sister who attends junior college and a younger brother in middle school.

Nia is quiet and reflective in her demeanor; she thinks before she speaks. When I first met Nia, she was a shy, overweight, angry, ninth grader. She was mostly quiet and it took much encouraging for Nia to participate in the group. There were multiple instances after the group session that Nia would stay to have a private conversation. In those moments, she would voice her opinions and talk openly about her career plans and academic goals. "It's like I want to do something where I help people not like a social worker, like what you do with us." However, with teachers, Nia's attitude about school indicated that that she was doing the teachers a favor when she completed class assignments and homework. Consequently, Nia struggled to complete work choosing

only to complete assignments that were of interest to her.

One subject, African American history, genuinely interest Nia and served as a catalyst in promoting reading on her own. For example, she once shared, "I love to know about the past because I know it has made us who we are today. People seemed to be stronger back in the day." She retains and comprehends what she reads and when discussing historical or current political topics and she has the ability to reflect and respond in an intellectual manner.

In her sophomore year, Nia's academics improved tremendously and she began working with an English teacher as a photographer on the yearbook staff. This responsibility gave Nia a huge vote of confidence. By summer Nia made up all her failed classes from the previous year and was enrolled in English honors class for the fall of her junior year.

Emotional — In her sophomore year, Nia seemed to make a big adjustment and made a concerted effort towards improving her self-esteem and academic goals. During the summer she lost 40 pounds from 220 to 180 pounds. She shared with me that she lost the weight because she was "tired of being the fat girl" and "I don't want people to be scarred of me." She started drinking only water, no soda or juice, and she walked everywhere instead of taking the bus. Initially, her grades improved. She began to work on the yearbook at high school and she attended and participated in the SC on a regular basis. However, towards the end of her sophomore year, Nia resorted to smoking marijuana again and her drug usage became paramount to everything else. Her grades dropped, her participation in the SC was sporadic and her overall spark about life began to diminish.

Nia used marijuana as a coping strategy to relieve the tension and angst she experienced as a young African American adolescent female. She did not perceive marijuana as a drug and explained, "It [marijuana] doesn't hurt my school work." On multiple occasions I suspected that Nia might be high, or under the influence of drugs, during the Sister Circle class. After consulting with the counselor, I allowed her to stay in the group session because I feared for her safety. I was worried about what might happen to her if she were to leave school and walk the streets in that condition. Knowing I had little control over the students' marijuana use, I decide to challenge the girls not to smoke before school or while they were doing homework. Nia, and two other girls who had admitted to smoking marijuana regularly, accepted the challenge. The non-smokers in the SC perceived marijuana smoking as "loser status" and they described how smoke "turned your lips dark" and that "guys don't like girls who smoke marijuana." The challenge was short lived.

At the end of her sophomore year, Nia was raped. She attended a party with friends and she was left alone in a room with a man she had seen around the neighborhood. They smoked marijuana and drank alcohol. The friends that she arrived with at the party left without telling her. Soon after, the man raped her. Nia later shared that she thought the rape was "a possible set-up", but quickly dismissed the idea. Nia detailed going to the county hospital to be examined after the rape and feeling as though the nurses "acted as if I had done something wrong." The rapist was eventually arrested and sent to jail. She later had to go to court to identify the perpetrator. She shared, "I wish it never happened. My mom doesn't want me hanging out with my friends from the party." She went on to describe the hate she felt for the man who raped her and shared

that she had not been to counseling; she "didn't need it."

The work she had put in with the yearbook committee, making up failed classes, individual mentoring time with the SC coordinator; all seemed to improve her self-esteem. However, the untold ramifications of this traumatic incident derailed all of the emotional development that Nia had been building.

Nia finished her junior year in what appeared to be a disoriented and depressed state. She attended the SC regularly and would participate sparingly in group discussions. There were difficult group discussions about sexual activity, particularly sex with older men. In addition, Nia experienced multiple altercations with fellow students. In one case, a male student called her "a bitch" and she slapped the boy in response. She was suspended for her actions.

After the suspension, her academics and self-esteem began to fall apart. There were multiple examples of Nia trying to find herself after a traumatic summer. Hair was an important topic within the Sister Circle. The group encouraged Nia to comb her hair instead of wearing scarves. Grooming and proper hair care was an issue that was addressed in the SC in the initial phase of the intervention. Participants often choose to wear head scarves, rather than take the time to groom their hair. I constantly reminded the students about the images they present and to smile and sit up straight in formal settings. I hoped that these minor symbols would help Nia to rebuild her self-esteem. I struggled personally to watch Nia regress into behaviors that had been addressed in her sophomore year. Moreover, her behavior seemed a cry for help. The effects of the rape and lack of professional counseling seemed to have taken their toll on Nia.

Social ─ Nia's social interactions improved tremendously since her freshman

year. Nia had gone from a hurt and angry person to a charming, approachable, young lady. Through the SC, and other school activities that served as a support system, she had established a positive identity. Teachers and counselors commented on the change they had seen in her behavior. A counselor who worked with Nia when she first enrolled at the neighborhood high school commented, "Nia is like a new kid. Whatever is going on in the SC is working for her. Her grades and attitude have improved tremendously. I have actually had other teachers talk to me about Nia and how she is doing well in their class." She was less combative in class and she had started to take on a leadership role with other girls in the SC and in class with group projects.

There were many discussions in the group and privately with Nia about her marijuana use and that drugs often can place users in unhealthy and unsafe situations. Such was the case when, Nia attended a party where drugs and alcohol were being consumed and she was raped. Some of the SC girls that experimented with marijuana with her initially were no longer smoking. Socially, Nia was quietly gaining "loser status" amongst some of the members of the SC. Her friends and social companions became fewer and fewer and she was often seen walking alone. Although, the SC acted as a constant reminder and warning about the use of drugs and alcohol; the social acceptance of marijuana use in Nia's world would not allow her to heed the numerous warnings.

A Safe Space is Vital

Nia reached out for help during the summer before her junior year. I was pleased to see her accessing a support system that she had built. However, I was struck by her request. She asked me if she could "hang out at my house during the summer." Nia

shared that her home life was not supportive of her and she felt depressed and alone. Her

mom was active in her life, but the relationship was strained. It appeared as if her mother

had high expectations for Nia, but there was a disconnection between her mom's

aspirations and how Nia perceived the relationship.

Nia wanted to stay out of the neighborhood and not be around the "weed crowd."

With the consent of Nia's mother, Nia spent time both at my home and at local

community events with me. Nia's mom asked to meet me and when I arrived at Nia's

home, the older sister was sitting in the living room with her boyfriend and the younger

brother was playing in the kitchen area. The mother came from the back of the house and

greeted me. Although cordial there was sense of skepticism I felt as though my

involvement may have in some way been invasive. After consultation with my daughter

and Nia's mom, we all agreed that Nia could spend some time with me over the summer.

There were several occasions were Nia spent the day at my house, reading, or watching

television. Mostly, we sat on the sofa and talked about life. We discussed how she could

move forward and continue on her path to going to college.

The summer meetings at my home were used as a time to talk about life and

individual goal setting. There was also discussion about the rape, recovering from it, and

encouragement to get counseling. Nia disclosed feeling as if her mother and older sister

"didn't trust her after the rape." I mostly listened and tried to assure her that it was not

that they did not trust her it was that they didn't trust the people she was around. This was

their way of trying to protect her. Nia felt strongly that, in some way, she thought she had

lost their trust. Realizing my support was not enough, we discussed again why it was

important to go to counseling. I shared that I went to a therapist for help with difficult

emotional times in my life. I also discussed statistical data about rape and that this incident did not in any way define who she is or she could become.

According to the Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network (RAINN; n. d.), a higher percentage of Black women have been raped than other ethnic females; 44% of rapes occur in females younger than the age of 18. The effects of rape can include depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and alcohol and drug abuse. By her own admission, Nia has shown signs of all these effects to varying degrees. As a testament to her resiliency, Nia still attended summer school and passed the classes she needed to graduate.

Her senior year has not been a perfect year. Nia continues to smoke marijuana and has promiscuous/attention getting behavior with the opposite sex. She struggles in relationships both in and out of school. Her behavior in the SC became withdrawn and when engaged, there was mostly anger expressed. After several individual meetings with Nia in the fall of her senior year, she began to go to counseling. She will graduate on time and has plans to enroll in a Certified Nursing Assistant program for home health care providers. Through her social capital, Nia's mom has arranged for Nia's entrance into the home care provider program. Although this is not what Nia describes as her life goal or career plan, she says she will work and go to college part-time.

Yvette

"I give a f-ck about school because school gives a f-ck about me."

Academic ― Yvette was a below average student and she struggled academically in all subjects. Her 8th grade state exam scores placed her in developmental math and regular English as a 9th grader. However, like many of the SC girls, Yvette's potential far

outweighed her academic performance. She acquired 5 discipline referrals in her first

semester of high school for fighting in and out of the classroom and for being belligerent

to teachers. She was often late to school because she was responsible for getting her

younger siblings up and ready for their school. In her first semester of high school, she

was late 32 times and absent 27 days out of a total of 87.

One of the biggest detriments to her academic performance was her negative

behavior. Yvette failed classes based on non-attendance because she was often 'kicked

out" or removed from class by teachers or school security. In other cases, she would fail

because she simply did not attend classes, but remained present on campus. Given her

violent outbursts teachers seldom questioned her absence. She explained that she would

often "skip class" or deliberately "provoke the teacher [in order] to get sent to the dean's

office." When asked about Yvette and other SC members, a counselor reflected on the

constant state of crisis in their lives:

> I wouldn't come to school at all. If I had to contend with parents who had
>
> abandoned me, drugs and gangs violence outside my door, worrying about food
>
> on the table, electricity in the house, and all types of abuse. For many the school
>
> is the safest place in the community. Honestly, students arrival at school should
>
> be honored versus punished for being late, they come to school with life problems
>
> beyond their years and are expected to come into a classroom and absorb
>
> Shakespeare as if all is well.

The Sister Circle sought to help the girls, especially Yvette, to make sense of these

conditions and to set both short term and longer range goals.

Yvette often complained that she did not want to attend classes because the

teachers were boring. I struggled throughout Year I to remind the SC girls that not all classes and teachers were going to be interesting. Non-participation and resistance were not options for them. The idea that most resonated with Yvette was a one-on-one discussion I had with her:

I asked, "Why do you not participate or do your work in certain classes?" Yvette responded, "Well, if certain teachers don't like me, I don't like them. The way I show them that I don't like them is I don't say or do anything in their class. And, when they call on me, I just act like they aren't talking to me and they look stupid and everybody in the class laughs. It used to be worse, I used to get up and walk out of class if I didn't like them." I questioned further, "But what if it never mattered to any teacher that you were in their class? What if the information was an essential component to your entire life would you get the information?" "Yes," she said, "When you put it that way, that getting the information is going to affect my entire life than yes, I see what you're talking about." Frequently giving Yvette examples of why school was important proved to be a critical element in trying to change deeply rooted negative perceptions about school and the role education in her life.

Emotional — Yvette's emotional development was like watching a rollercoaster. Like most students, Yvette's emotional state was determined before arriving at school each day. Yvette's home life was in constant fluctuation and, on any given day, a crisis would occur that would derail Yvette's emotional development. Yvette lived with her grandmother for the six years prior to high school. Her grandmother served as a foster grandparent to Yvette and her younger brother in her mother's absent. Yvette is the oldest of 4 children. Yvette's mom gave birth to her and her brother at 16 and 18 years old.

Sometime during Yvette's freshmen year, her mother reappeared. It is not clear if Yvette's mother had a substance abuse problem or why she left Yvette with her grandmother. Upon her return, Yvette's mom had a new baby girl and was pregnant with her fourth child. After Yvette's mother arrived back in town, Yvette lived between her mother's house and her grandmother's house. She was excited about having her mom back in her life, but she resented having to take care of younger siblings at her mother's house. She found solace at her grandmother's home.

Yvette's emotional behavior seemed to be in a constant state of upheaval and much like her home life, it was unpredictable. At school, Yvette would become a completely different person from moment to moment. At the beginning of each SC session, she would be kind and helpful. Soon after, particularly when other girls arrived for SC meeting, she would become combative and act as a bully in the group. I stopped constantly during the weekly sessions to remind Yvette not to threaten anyone in the group or refer to them with "names other than their own." This scenario played out repeatedly for an entire semester. Yvette would come to the meeting room early, in a great mood, and she would help set up the room and snacks. As soon as the other SC girls arrived, Yvette would threaten her colleagues. Each time, we discussed my observations of her erratic behavior, which would lead to her promising to not act that way the next time. The next time would come and she would repeat the behavior.

Low self-esteem was often at the core of Yvette's disruptive behavior in classes and in the SC. Her name calling, gossiping, and disrespectful interactions with her peers served only to alienate her peers. At the end of her freshmen semester, I shared with Yvette that many of the girls did not trust her and that some were even afraid of her. It

was explained that friendships are based on trust and that during the school year there had

been many times when that trust had been broken as a result of her erratic and violent

temperament. Yvette shared, "I don't know why I act that way" and others, including her

friends, said she would act "like a bully." After many individual meetings we decided on

a course of action. Yvette would put forth effort to be kind and considerate consistently.

The spring semester was better and when Yvette would slip into the old patterns of

bullying other members of the SC, she would sometimes catch herself and sometimes it

took just a look from the coordinator and she would say, "oh, my bad" and redirect

herself to a more appropriate behavior.

Social ― Yvette lacked basic social skills necessary to maintain friendships and

to establish trust. The basic skill of personal interaction and how to develop relationships

is something that is taught in the home or in pre-school; skills such as sharing and doing

unto to others as you would have them do unto you. When these basic personal

interaction skills are not learned and practiced; this can make for difficult relationships in

the future. Yvette wanted to make friends and to be involved with groups however the

lack of personal skills would often alienate other SC members. Her personal interactions

with school personnel were, at best, difficult and often bordered on being disrespectful.

This behavior caused an alienation of Yvette from school personnel as some would rather

ignore her than to engage her. What was transformative was watching Yvette struggle to

learn new ways of interacting with her SC peers and school personnel adults.

A defining moment occurred when Yvette had an emotional breakdown during a

SC weekly session. Yvette cried about herself, her home life, and the lack of a real

relationship with her mother. All of the SC members embraced her and told her that they

all had the same issues and that they loved her and that they were there for her. For the first time, Yvette was socially connected to the group in an emotional bond. She found trust in the group; moreover, she found friendship.

"I Don't Know How to be a Friend"

In the second year of the program, there had been much groundwork in terms of trust and relationship building. The group started at a different level of trust and respect for themselves and the group as a whole. Most of the girls had improved academically. Almost none of the girls had discipline referrals. Yvette had not made the same progress as other group members, she had not improved academically, and she had received a discipline referral within the first few weeks of the new school year for fighting. Soon after she received the second discipline referral, she was put on a zero-tolerance contract at the school. A zero-tolerance contract means that for any infraction of the school rules, the student can be transferred out of the school, no questions asked and no second chances. This is exactly what happened to Yvette.

Yvette continued to attend the SC and one day, for no particular reason, Yvette came to the group unusually loud, rude, using profanity, and threatened a SC member. She was asked to leave after several attempts to calm and redirect her behavior. She refused to leave. Finally, I asked, "Why are you here?" I explained that she did not have to be in the SC and it was not mandatory. I reiterated that her behavior was unacceptable to the group and to please leave. Obviously not wanting to leave, but not conforming to the group's norms, she blurted out with an almost guttural emotion and crying:

"I have nowhere else to go. I have no friends and no family that care about me.

This is all I have and when I act up I don't know why. I need this [group]. If you

take this away from me, I will have nothing."

That day was a huge changing point for both Yvette and the group. The girls began to tell Yvette that she had them and that they cared about her.

The sisterhood that had silently been building spoke out loudly that day. Lorde (1984) states: "Often we give lip service to the idea of mutual support and connection between Black women because we have not crossed the barriers to these possibilities, not fully explored the angers and fears that keep us from realizing the power of a real Black sisterhood" (p. 153). The girls told Yvette, that she was "rude and loud" and that many times they didn't like her and were afraid of her, but that they loved her even though, "you act a fool, we got you. You will always belong to us. We are your sisters." Finally, a show of an emotion other than anger from Yvette, this felt like a breakthrough. She stayed after the group and discussed how she could move on from this point. She apologized and promised never to behave that way again; she would keep her promise to the SC, but not with other teachers and administrators.

Later that year, the SC members were scheduled to attend a field trip they had planned for weeks. On the day of the field trip, the girls were gathered on the steps waiting for the bus. As the permission slips were collected and attendance was taken, Yvette was missing from the group. A few girls stated, "She can't go." When asked why, they replied she had cursed out the assistant principal. I thought progress had been made and maybe there was a mistake. Yvette came outside and tearfully explained what happened and expressed much regret about the incident. When asked to explain, she told the same type of story of her behavior in the past. When asked had she apologized to the assistant principal her response was, "No."

As we stood there in front of the school, wondering what to do not Yvette began to talk about her life. She described her relationship with her mother as "all I am to her is a babysitter for her new kids." After many years of not being in her life, her mother was back with "new kids and she hasn't raised me or my brother." She described physical abuse by a grandmother, who had retrieved her and the brother from foster care. She said all she had that was positive or "focused on me and my life" is the SC and now she was going to be kicked out the school and she wouldn't have that.

Together, Yvette and I went to the assistant principal and Yvette sincerely apologized for the disrespectful behavior toward the assistant principal. The assistant principal allowed Yvette to attend the field trip more as a professional courtesy to me rather than wanting to see Yvette have another pass on the consequences of her behavior. She expressed doubt about the sincerity of Yvette's apology and confirmed her distrust by saying "We'll see how this turns out." On the field trip, again there was much discussion about building self-esteem and that by apologizing for inappropriate behavior and changing your actions this will aid in your development.

Sadly, one week later, Yvette was in a fight and was transferred out of Central High School. The girls often reported that Yvette had not enrolled in the alternative school and that she had been seen in the neighborhood looking sad and depressed. On a few occasions, she came to the SC after school and talked about the good old days at Central High School.

As one of the counselor's described Yvette:

The backstory on many of these girls is unbelievable. Many of the girls that are members of the SC suffer from undiagnosed post-traumatic stress disorder. Given

the condition of many of the girls' lives in the SC, it is amazing that they get out

of bed and show up at school every day.

There have been two members of the SC who have been shot, one died. This is the truth

of the community; there is no embellishment or additive needed. The area they live in is

home to drug dealers, gangs and all the horrible social problems of poverty in urban

America. Rarely is there someone asking about homework and how their day was, little

to no encouragement, there is mostly a day-to-day existence.

Further, one Central High counselor stated that "the stress levels of the girls in the

SC are comparable to military personnel returning from Iraq." When asked how the

school and school counselors deal with such deep emotional issues in counseling, he said,

"the formula is STAT, which stands for see, treat, acknowledge, transfer." Although not

an in-depth therapeutic method that may best assist the SC members, it is often the best

that can be done when there are only two counselors for a student population of 2,500

students. In the case of Yvette, the school's action of transferring her to an alternative

school was to get rid of a problem. Another teacher describes Yvette's case as all too

familiar, "Instead of helping students like Yvette and coming up with a plan of action, the

documentation begins and after several write ups, referrals, and incidents, Yvette is

transferred out." In fairness to the school, there were many attempts to assist Yvette. The

last intervention was the SC. Perhaps more was needed. Yvette left school in her

sophomore year and was supposed to enroll in alternative school.

Rochelle

"I remember everything. My mom thinks I don't. It's really hard for her to tell me

anything. I mean it's not like she was there for me when I needed her."

Academic — Rochelle is academically proficient and, in some classes, she is advanced. Based on state exam scores in 8th grade, she placed into honors courses upon entering high school. Rochelle's overall GPA is 3.3 and she takes advanced placement courses in English and World History. In addition, Rochelle is on the Speech and Debate team and has won school and district wide competitions. Like Deidra, Rochelle seems to grasp higher level concepts and she enjoys academic challenges. Her academic interest and abilities can be attributed to her genuine and intrinsic interest in acquiring knowledge.

She is confident in her opinions, and, for example, for an assignment to develop a vision board, Rochelle did an amazing job displaying pictures, symbols and references to her future , "I can visualize myself in career not just a job, in a beautiful home not an apartment." Whereas many of the other SC members used the vision board assignment to vision immediate material items such as shoes, purses and clothes. However, Rochelle can be withdrawn when it comes to participating in group work, preferring to work alone; particularly, if she views the work as mundane or if she is asked to work with a student who she thinks is less academically capable. She has great potential and realizes that education is a key component to changing her life.

Her support system in school are teachers who have acknowledged and encouraged her academic capabilities and often made Rochelle feel special because of her grades and extra-curricular accomplishments. Rochelle rejects the notion that she is special or gifted, she perceives herself as an average student. In discussing her relationships with school personnel:

As I see it, most adults want to use me to say, look how I have helped Rochelle or

to show me off as some type of special person. When truthfully, I know I am an average kid in the hood, with the same problems as everyone else. But no one want to focus on that part of me, they just want a report card. So, I use them like they use me. If you want me to show up, buy me lunch, pay for something I want.

Rochelle stands out as an achiever among African American students particularly females. School personnel may know her abilities are average when compared to other students, from schools in other areas. However, in a poor urban high school where academic achievement in general is often poor she is representative of student success as a whole.

Emotional ― Rochelle's backstory consists of placement in more than15 different foster care and group homes throughout a 5-year period. According to Rochelle, she would act out in these homes because she did not want to be placed away from her mother. At one point during the foster care period, she was placed with her mother's sister. When the aunt could no longer provide care for Rochelle and her siblings, she was placed outside the family. Thus began the cycle of acting out in order to be placed in a different home. Rochelle's acting out consisted of fighting at school, yelling, screaming, and running away from the foster care provider.

After her mother completed a drug treatment program, she was eventually reunited with her children. Rochelle says that initially, she was really happy to be together with her mother and things went well for a period of time. The family received some counseling and Rochelle thrived academically at school for a time. Although there were readjustments, progress was being made in the reunification of the family.

Rochelle's resiliency through these difficult emotional issues manifested several

different coping strategies that consisted of sucking her thumb as a way of seemingly

soothing herself when she appears anxious about a situation. She admits that she dealt

with the separation from her mother and her siblings by acting out in foster care facilities

as an attention-getting ploy. She rationalizes the behavior because she felt as though the

foster care homes-families were providing for her because of the money they earned.

Included in Rochelle's support system, as she perceives it, is her boyfriend. She

looks for emotional support from her boyfriend who is the dominant male figure in her

life. The boyfriend is a gang member and a high school dropout. He is fiercely possessive

of Rochelle and has a violent temper. Additionally he has had several confrontations with

Rochelle's mother. Although Rochelle says "he is probably not the best thing for me and

my future. I do like the attention he gives me and he has been there for me." She is

distrustful of adults as she has had many negative experiences with extended family

members, social agencies, educational personnel, and therapists who have interacted with

her family, her siblings and her mother in dealing with issues of addiction, recovery

foster care, and incarceration.

Rochelle has learned to use violent outburst and anger to manipulate school and

agency personnel. She views the help offered by agencies as demeaning and/or artificial.

In a one-on-one with Michelle she describes her relationship with her court appointed

therapist:

> She is just there to make a buck off me. She don't (sic) really know or care who I
>
> am. She just wants to know my mama's business so she can report back to the
>
> judge how my mama is and that I should stay in foster care. Instead of separating
>
> us they should be trying to keep us together because when it comes down to it

when I turn 18 and no longer a ward of the court who is going to be there for me

except my mama. So, I tell her some sad story it's not what I really feel they will

never know that.

She expanded further about her true feelings: "I don't know, I am really numb, I don't

feel anything. Sometimes I am really happy and can see my future, then there are times

when I feel really alone like I have to figure it by myself."

Rochelle's reflection is insightful as to her behavior; there are times in school

where she is highly motivated and focused, simply a joy to be around. Then there are

time where she is combative and not necessarily her happiest which leads to her being

withdrawn and combative.

Social — Rochelle's social behavior with peers seem distant, she did not have

class with any of the SC members as she is in advanced placement courses. She seemed

to be friendly towards some of the Latinas in her classes; those relationships seemed

confined only to class. Her relationships with SC members in and out of the SC meetings

are sometime strained. It appears that she gets quickly frustrated and annoyed with some

of the behaviors that other members exhibit. Some of the SC members say "she acts stuck

up or that she is weird." She does not have one group or a best friend that she is regularly

connected to in the school. She is alone most of the time. Her only consistent social outlet

is her boyfriend. Rochelle enjoys the attention and love she receives from him, although

at other times she is annoyed at his constant phone calls and lack of education. At the end

of the school year, Rochelle revealed that she was pregnant. She says she knows it will be

difficult to complete her college goals, but she seems determined to graduate from high

school and attend college.

At the end of her junior year and as her pregnancy progressed she began to realize that all adults were not out to report about her life situation to fulfill professional obligations. She began to network with African American adult women in the school and in the community who talked with her about how to care for herself and the baby. They spoke about the importance of finishing school and most of all she acknowledged these women as being supportive to her without any motive. Rochelle began to demonstrate feelings of trust by showing up to SC events and some school events without being asked or bribed. Rochelle continued to participate in the SC and even attended a few college fairs and a conference. She has dreams of college and spoke of preparing for college entrance exams.

The Presence of a Consistent and Caring Adult Changes Lives

One of the main purposes of the Sister Circle is to motivate young Black women to do something with their lives. The defining factor for Rochelle was the presence of a caring adult as a crucial factor in her resiliency to continue to thrive and go to school and to achieve academically. Rochelle had experienced many adults who were providers and caretakers however the presence of a caring adult who is truly interested in who you are as a person is quite different from providing basics such as food and shelter. Although she struggled in foster care there were caseworkers and teachers who recognized and encouraged her academic development.

As an example, there was one male English teacher who took the extra step to engage and interact with Rochelle on the yearbook committee. This teacher gave Rochelle creative control over designing certain sections of the yearbook and believed that she could handle the task. There were times in the initial stages of the relationship

that she challenged and disappointed the teacher. He was patient and gave her many opportunities to succeed, His presence and genuine caring about Rochelle's life and circumstance aided in her overall development.

Summary of Four Focal Students

Another purpose of the SC program is to create a safe place for at-risk, African American girls to develop academically, emotionally and socially on a pathway to completing high school. The SC program is a purposeful intervention that addresses the complicated issues that the normal school day and/or teacher may or may not have time to adequately address. As witnessed in the four focal students, the Sister Circle created a safe space where participants can find nurture, respect, develop self-esteem, and a caring adult. At times, this SC experience had profound impacts on the focal students' behavior inside and outside or school; and at other times, their brief experience in the SC could not overcome the constant challenges SC students faced in the community. Deidra, Nia, Yvette, and Rochelle all exhibited remarkable transformations during their time with the Sister Circle. In her own way, each of them walked a little taller, learned to speak softer and with thoughtfulness, and they carried themselves with pride. Minimally, the SC allowed the participants to experience, albeit briefly at times, their potential. In Chapter V I will analyze the four focal student experiences and present emergent themes from the triangulated data sources.

Chapter V: Findings, Discussion, Recommendations, and Conclusions

This study examined 2 years of the Sister Circle, an intervention program designed to serve the needs of African American female adolescent students in a large, urban high school. As described earlier, the Sister Circle engaged the participants in a safe space where they could acquire the social and emotional skills necessary to navigate school and their community. From the very start what emerged as an unfulfilled need in the lives of these AAFAs was not merely the lack of academic, social, or emotional support; rather, it became evident that the SC girls lacked the consistency of a safe place, self-esteem, and caring adults where their academic, social, and emotional needs could be met. Chapter IV uses the perceptions of four focal students to better understand how the Sister Circle influenced the participants' high school experiences and their academic, social, and emotional development.

This final chapter concludes the study with direct answers to the following three research questions:

1. How do SC members perceive that the intervention has influenced their academic, social, and emotional development?

2. How do SC members perceive that the intervention influences their behavior and attitude in and out of school with peers, parents, and school personnel?

3. How do teachers and counselors perceive that the SC has influenced AAFAS students at Central High School?

In addition, the chapter includes an in-depth look at emergent themes that evolved through this research and the findings which include implications for theory, practice, and areas for further research.

Research Question One

       Research question one asked: How do SC members perceive that the intervention

has influenced their academic, social, and emotional development? The pervasive

perception from SC participants is that the Sister Circle positively influenced their

academic, social and emotional behavior. It is apparent from the data collected that the

SC impacted the participants in a variety of ways. However, other factors such as natural

maturity, resiliency and other efforts by school personnel may have all played a role in

the perceived positive change in, and by, the participants.

       Academically. SC participants reported caring about grades and academic

performance after the intervention. As noted in Chapter 4, almost all of the SC members

entered the program below academic proficiency. Some of the participants were

accepting of passing classes with Ds. After the first semester of the intervention semester

grades were collected and discussed individually and collectively. Many of the

participants were in remedial English and Math courses receiving failing grades. One

participant "I didn't know grades mattered". Academic performance in the second

semester, as those who were making progress began to bring their graded assignments to

class for words of encouragement. Although academic performance only increased

slightly, there was progress.

       Emotionally. Most of the participants marked progress significantly in the area of

emotional development. One of the participants noted " I don't let what people say or

think about me affect me anymore; I don't have to fight I can walk away". There were

many similar responses to emotional growth and the fact the girls were not fighting each

other or receiving discipline referrals. Emotionally many of the girls noted "I have the SC

to talk about how I feel". This type of statement was repeated many times; having the SC as a safe place to talk about feelings of any kind was of major importance. Emotional growth and stability has many variables such as home life, social environment, financial stability, and stress factors from past and present issues. Therefore, the challenge of the emotional growth and development of SC members can sometimes be derailed based on these factors.

Socially. The development of the SC socially was often comical the participants would make comments like "stop acting ghetto or "stop talking loud, be respectful". These comments were often made as self-corrections or by older members to newer members. It was amazing to watch the SC members switch their behavior when we were on field trips versus our weekly meetings. This type of behavior change is commonly referred to as code switching. This switching of behavior was a skill that was taught over and over again in the first year of the intervention program. It was challenging when outside the school to teach those socially acceptable behaviors.

Research Question Two

Research question two asked: How do SC members perceive that the intervention influences their behavior and attitude in and out of school with peers, parents, and school personnel? The participants are adamant about the intervention influencing their behavior and attitude in and out of school. The data supports the behavioral change as it pertains to discipline referrals. There was a dramatic decrease in participants discipline referrals from the first and second year of participation. Participants also describe learning how to more effectively resolve conflict with peers and school personnel. There may be additional factors that contributed to the overall decline in discipline referrals such as

better school connectedness and natural maturity and resiliency of participants.

Research Question Three

Research question three asked: How do teachers and counselors perceive that the SC has influenced AAFA students at Central High School? Of the principals, teachers and counselors interviewed all perceived the program to have positively influenced the intervention participants mostly in the area of personal development and self–esteem. The most frequent critique of the intervention by teachers and counselors was there should have been more meeting times and involved more AAFAS on campus. The most frequent comment was about the SC participants behavior emotional and social developments were mentioned as "they (AAFAs) need somewhere to discuss what's going on in their lives". Additionally, comments involved " it's good they (AAFAs) have a role model". The critique that was made about the intervention was that it did not adequately address academic development.

Emergent Themes

Themes that emerged throughout this research have been consistent with the needs of the SC participants. Having a safe place to talk, meet, vent, and openly be themselves was vitally important to the SC members. Sisterhood and the development of friendships with each other is a crucial factor that emerged as well as maintaining conflict free relationships with each other. Respect for one another, teachers, and school personnel was also significant as the participants' often perceived disrespect by each other and school personnel. The real or perceived lack of respect was most often from feelings of inadequacy or not belonging. Ultimately, this factor emerged as a self- esteem theme. The data collected and analyzed throughout the 2-year period dictated the

emergence of the themes.

Safe Place

In 2008–2009, 17 of the 18 weekly reports mentioned the words safety and/or a safe place. The words were used to describe why the girls came to the SC or to infer the place where we were meeting. Initially, the SC met in the back of the library. The discussions during the meetings started to address more sensitive issues. SC soon needed a private place where we could close the door. In 2009–2010 the meeting space continued in the library and the girls and I were grateful for the space. There were positive comments about having a safe-place they could call their own. Over and over again SC members mentioned "being happy to have a place where they could just be themselves."

In 2010–2011, the library was no longer available because the after-school tutorial program needed the computers and that took precedence over the SC meeting. There were several places in the school that were offered such as an old storage area which was inadequate to the principal's conference room which was inappropriate. These spaces were in some ways inadequate. Finally, the SC was invited by an African American English teacher to utilize her room as a meeting space.

Safety and safe place as provided in the SC was not only a physically safe place but an emotionally safe place to ask questions and get factual, honest answers. There were no questions or topics off limits. The SC also served as a physically safe place from violence against each other and in the school. Most of all it served as a safe place to be oneself, to be a child that was cared for and nurtured. Collins (2000) describes the necessity of safe places for black women, "This realm of relatively safe discourse, however narrow, is a necessary condition for Black women's resistance" (p. 111). The

majority of the girls recall the painstaking efforts of the weekly sessions in the first year and learning how to resolve conflict amongst themselves without physical contact. They spoke of the safe place just to talk or yell, use profanity, and to get out what they are feeling.

Nia's safe place, although not necessarily physical, was the SC, which gave her the perception of safety. Nia's traumatic experience, for which she will need more counseling to surpass the trauma caused by the rape, will have serious consequences for her in the future if not addressed. Johnson (2003) describes the strong correlation between criminality and women's histories of physical and sexual abuse, "There must be a preventive and protective effort to address the safety of African American girls in their homes and communities" (p. 283). The U.S. Department of Juvenile Justice (2010) report on girls concurs that sexual abuse in adolescent girls has a high correlation to future criminality in adult woman.

The safe place the SC created was what a male counselor, A. Tuazon (personal communication, May 5, 2011), interpreted as:

> The SC program plants the seeds and they need to be watered by school staff. The school personnel do not have time to work with the SC members. The school is too large. The school acts as a crisis unit: see them, stabilize them, and send them off. The mental health issues in the SC consist of depression, antisocial behavior and posttraumatic stress disorder. At least 90% of SC members have had a traumatic event occur: domestic violence, physical and sexual assault, robbery, fights, accosted by a gang member.

Overall, the change is that the SC members are more connected to the school. They feel

as though they have a place in the school that is uniquely for them. Some SC participants

began to participate in other school activities and events after being in the SC. Again

Collins (2009) addressed the crucial concept of safe places:

> The worst physical space can be made into a vibrant location if it is first safe (a
>
> major reason kids skip school or behave as they do in their classroom is that they
>
> think the environment is unsafe); and second, free, that it is a space where they
>
> can share unpopular, scary provocative and most basically, political thoughts and
>
> have those thoughts taken seriously and not dismissed out of hand. (p. 93)

The SC provided a place where the expressions of political thoughts were taken

seriously and further strategies were taught on how to negotiate the political waters of

their environment. For example, many of the SC members would voice concern over the

lack of respect by teachers and thereby justifying their negative behavior in class. While

acknowledging the possibility of disrespect by a teacher, I would focus the discussion

around the idea of how to get around the behavior of an unjust teacher to ultimately get

what you need to succeed. Watching the SC members positively negotiate their

environment and to get the positive attention that they so needed was a boost to their self-

esteem.

Self-Esteem

One way to describe self-esteem is positive image of oneself Language and

behavior are factors in the positive self-development. The use of derogatory language to

describe oneself is not a positive self-affirming action. In the first year of the SC many of

the girls used profanity with each other, in ear range of, and directed at, teachers on a

consistent basis. Another behavior that served to devalue and divide the AAFAs on

campus was the physical fighting between one another. One member described the beginning stages of the intervention by shaking her head and saying, "We were really bad and the cold part about it; everyone in the school knew and did nothing about it."

The decrease in profanity extended into the school as well. When probed about school personnel not admonishing SC members' bad behavior in the classroom one member stated, "It wasn't until the SC that teachers or counselors started to recognize us or act like they cared; you [the researcher] would never let us act like that around you. That's how we knew you really cared about us." Several SC members recounted how often they used profanity with teachers and administrators. When asked why they used that type of language with teachers and staff, one member stated, "to be honest, I don't really know." It has been my experience of working with the SC that has led to the belief that the level of respect expected and given will more than likely be the level of respect received.

The regular use of the words "B-tch" and "N-gger" were either used as a term of endearment or as a degrading term within the SC and around the school in general. Both words were not allowed in the SC sessions as I believe it impeded the development of the positive self-image that was so desperately needed. Yvette used profanity excessively in reference to herself and others. After the first year of the SC and innumerable corrections of her language she began to self-correct when she would accidently use offensive words in front of me. Yvette would say "Oh I know you don't like me to talk like that or my bad I didn't mean to be rude." This lets me know that while she was developing a consciousness about her language she was also gaining respect for herself and others. I disagree with Stevens (2002) proposal that "negative and positive racial self-valuations

may coexist while personal integrity is sustained" (p. 83). I found in this study quite the

opposite. In order for personal integrity to develop; valuation of race, gender, and words

to describe one's self had to be self-affirming. We become what we speak; therefore, use

of derogatory names was not allowed. Often I heard SC members and other students

freely using negative words in the presence of other school personnel without reprimand

from the staff or censorship from the student. When allowed to exhibit one form of

disrespect it becomes easier to exhibit other forms of disrespect by both students and

school personnel. The SC member's self-image and self-esteem began to grow when they

were able to identify their own positive self-identification through words and deeds.

Additional evidence of growth and a positive self-image involves how the SC

members maintained their hair. Prior to the intervention, it was perfectly acceptable for

girls to wear head scarves to school. The scarves were used as a way to cover uncombed

hair. The requirements to attend a SC field trip were that students must have their hair

combed, they could not wear head scarves, and they must wear appropriate clothing. The

evidence of changed behavior was apparent in the second year of the program when the

older members informed a new member that she would not be allowed to attend the field

trip with a head scarf tied on her head.

One of the most profound findings was that the participants in the intervention

program began to see their similarities to one another versus the subtle differences that

often divided the group. Initially, when the intervention program began, many of the girls

were fighting one another. The fights mainly occurred based on perceived gossip and

disrespect. Many weekly sessions were spent in the first year dispelling rumors and

gossip discussing what it means to have self-respect. There was one session which

several of the girls described as changing their perceptions: *the Stand Up Exercise*. The activity asked a series of questions that required participants to stand if the question being asked pertained to them. The coordinator modified the activity to represent many of the girls' experiences. It was in this session where many of the attitudes and guards went down and they began to see their similarities: most of them have grown up without a father in the home; they all know someone who is in prison; who had been shot; involved in gangs; or who is or has had drug and/or alcohol problems. Several of the girls remembered how this activity made them feel closer to each other because they realized they were basically the same and they should be supportive of one another instead of fighting each other.

There were other activities used to develop self-esteem and sisterhood such as the camping trip. When asked about what the favorite activity was, many of the girls responded that it was the camping trip and the ropes course. They liked being challenged, the different environment of the mountains, and being able to "see the sky and hear the quiet." The girls described feeling encouraged as they were being cheered on by each other to complete the ropes course

When discussing perceived behavior change in the girls, some teachers had divided opinions on whether the intervention had made a difference. Both principals, who were responsible for the intervention being at the school, immediately saw the difference in behavior and gave feedback about the girls. Both principals commented on the overall attitude and appearance of the girls, "It was as if they began to take pride in themselves; their self-esteem was higher." The referrals for fighting were drastically reduced in the first year. One school personnel noted: The girls' overall behavior towards teachers and

administrators began to change as a result of the program and those AAFAs who were participants of the SC were acknowledged in a positive manner for their involvement in the SC.

The SC is a pupil retention, personal upkeep, socialization, community building program. The students are learning a self-awareness that allows them to know who they are and to value themselves and each other. The SC participants speak of their personal struggles to become a better student/-person. In agreement with Belgrave (2009) "…involvement in spiritual and religious activities also promotes and maintains self-esteem and self-concept by providing institutional settings in which girls are connected to and supported by each other" (p. 14). Becoming a better person was a topic that often had roots in the belief in God and going to church. Although all members did not go to a church on a regular basis, all of them felt a sense of religiosity and the notion of something bigger than themselves. It or God was perceived as a source of comfort and as a guiding force towards becoming a better student/person. In general the positive self-esteem and the development of sisterhood were rooted in a form of spirituality. I often used that belief or notion as a tool to develop self-esteem. There are many times I offered the notion that in their darkest moment, when no one else was around to help them through a crisis and they needed something that they could believe in to get them through that moment, a belief that there was something bigger than themselves to carry them through would always be there as a guide and protector.

Caring Adult

The SC provided the presence of a caring adult who did not seek to malign, judge, or report to authorities, but simply bore witness to the truth. This finding reinforces

earlier research that looked at best practices for adults seeking to work with AAFAs in urban communities. Stevens (2002) attests, "One way the practitioner can respond is to intervene in ways that acknowledge that the adolescent has experienced circumstances where her full subjectivity has been disregarded or repudiated" (p. 176). The mere acknowledgement that there may be some injustice being served is a step towards developing trust with participants of the program.

In an interview with Deidra she gave an emotional account of the SC intervention literally saving her life. She described having a place to go to discuss how she was feeling without having to cover up or pretend. Deidra described the freedom of expression and the unconditional love she felt in the intervention program. Moreover, Deidra described the feeling of someone genuinely caring what happened to her and believing that what she had to say was real. The only regret Deidra had was that she wished she had listened sooner in the intervention. Although, Deidra did graduate, she wished she had the intervention in the ninth grade instead of the 11th grade. Deidra believed she would have done better academically.

Academically, student attributes the change in perception about school, academic achievement, and the importance of completing high school to the SC program. Several participants described the reason for their academic progress was because someone cared to ask and tell them about their grades. One participant described the weekly sessions as always having that moment where I would bring up grades, classes, and academic achievement. She said the fact that I always asked about grades served as a wake-up call to do better not just the minimum. African American women have historically had to do better and achieve more just to be counted as equal. Marginal achievement would lead to

a less than mediocre life.

Historically, African American women who had achieved and overcome challenges that led to a stable life and success to a degree often served as mentors and role models in neighborhood and communities. As demographics shifted and urban flight began many African American women who naturally filled these valuable roles of mentors and role models were not readily available to AAFAs in poor urban communities. The mentor or role model became even more needed in the 1980s and 1990's, when increasing numbers of poor, urban African American communities were under siege by the drugs wars of the time. In urban communities across the United States poor, urban Black communities took the brunt of the destruction created by drugs wars. Many young adults in these communities became addicted to drugs, incarcerated and or killed; leaving behind children, who often ended up in foster care and/or abandoned. This scenario is perfectly described by Collins (2000) "In the 1980's the entire community structure of blood mothers and other mothers came under assault. Racial segregation, as well as the emergence of class stratified neighborhoods, greatly altered the fabric of Black civil society" (p. 196). The helpful role of grandmothers, aunts, neighbors, family friends, and teachers was never designed to take over the most important role of the mother, although frequently this was the case. Secondary people began to take on the responsibilities of the primary role of mother. Rochelle rejected many *other-mothers* or secondary people trying to fill the role of mother in foster care homes, schools, and other family agencies. She loved her mother and did not want anyone trying to replace her. It was from Rochelle that I realized I did not have to serve a specific role. Simply, I needed to be caring adult that was available to encourage, listen and guide in whatever capacity

that was needed.

Some of the SC members may have missed some of traditional mother/daughter rites of passage being under the care of other mothers. There are certain life lessons that mothers are better designed to teach such as feminine health and hygiene. For example, a SC session consisted of woman's health speaker/educator who came as a guest speaker. During the session a SC participant raised her hand to ask a question and used inappropriate terminology for the female genital. When asked to use the appropriate term for the female genital, not one girl in the group that day, was able to use the appropriate term of vagina. A discussion of why inappropriate names are used to describe the female genital and the importance of knowing the appropriate names for all body parts ensued. These types of intimate discussions were frequent topics in the group's weekly meetings. The weekly meetings were a closed forum to ask adult questions and get honest answers about many personal and intimate topics.

As role model, mentor, other mother, and basically a caring adult, I would describe my major responsibility was to simply care. I often tried to define and redefine my role in the group as leader, mentor, big sister, friend, teacher, or mom and in fact it was all and none of these, simply I am a caring adult. When educators and others asked me to describe the program, many of the responses I give use the word "love." Love is a word that does not carry much academic validity, it may in fact be inappropriate to some. I would contend that at the core of working with any group that requires more than the traditional ration received from public education there must be a component that includes love. When looking at religious or private schools love is found in those schools if not only in the love of the institution. Several of the SC participants made comments about

how the program taught them to "love one another" and to "stop fighting," to "believe in themselves," and that "someone really cared." SC participants describe incidents of me reprimanding their behavior or about their poor academic performance, there were often tears, and hurt feelings, the SC participants would tell the story later "that's just you staying on our head or that's how we know you love us." Being a caring or loving adult carries the burden of teaching the hard lessons and loving anyway.

At the end of the first year I polled the participants and asked what they liked most about the SC? Some mentioned field trips others mention small trinkets and snack that were given, all of the participants referenced guest speakers as something they liked. In the second year I started to schedule speakers/community members both men and women who incorporated hopeful and inspiring messages in their work; these speakers often spoke of their individual life challenges and how they overcame their obstacles to live productive and rewarding lives.

The speakers spoke on themes that included: Seven Days to Transformation, Healing and Forgiving, Releasing Resentment, Charting my Own Destiny and what would become a signature speakers theme, Things My Mama Taught Me. These speakers often focused on; forgiveness of oneself and others, freedom to leave the past and create the future, healing yourself from the harm of others, goal setting and meditation. The emotional/social component seemed to serve as a crucial step in addressing the academic performance of the SC members. Once the SC members began to move towards emotional/spiritual awareness almost immediately academic and social abilities increased.

The SC was not specifically designed to address the deep and debilitating issues

of multigenerational poverty, drug abuse, and mental illness that are prominent issues in lives of SC members, particularly, as they pertain to the SC members and their mothers. Experts such as Collins (2000), hooks (2005), and Lorde (1984) describe the distinctive role of African American motherhood, rooted in slavery, female oppression, and racism, having to negotiate all aforementioned variables and raise children. Often it is the stories of survival and strength of African American women in which the SC member sees the strength of her mother instead of the flaws; then healing and forgiveness can begin.

Exposure, Experience, Evolution

The SC offered an opportunity for the members to have something in their lives that was uniquely their own and to choose to participate in their own lives to the fullest. Through exposures to art, history, and mentors relevant to African Americans with emphasis on women and their challenges and success the SC members experienced appropriate language and behavior pride in the rich history of African American women in the world, and as a result the SC members began to evolve.

Exposure. The SC provided monthly field trips to museums, parks, universities, and theatre events and performances. There was often contempt prior to attendance to the field trips to art shows, museums, and local cultural events in the community. However, once there, most of the SC participants would be engaged and excited about the event. In particular, there is an annual Pan-African Independent Film Festival with a student component. Students who wrote and directed documentaries and films of Africans and African American youth who survived tremendous challenges such as: war, modern day slavery, and poverty were always uplifting. The first 2 years of attendance the girls would make comments such as "we want to go to a real movie" or "I'm not from Africa and I

don't want to see this movie." Finally in the third year several of the girls asked, "When are we going to the film festival?" They had come to appreciate and identify with many of the stories of hope and resiliency that were being told.

      Experience. In discussing the importance of being able to communicate and survive in a world that requires the use of the dominant culture's social norms, it was sometime difficult to convince students that their behavior needed to change until they had an experience with their negative or inappropriate behavior that would highlight that change was needed. For example, Deidra had the ability to capture the attention of others. The principal described Deidra as a "leader in all the wrong places." It was a constant battle to respect what Deidra brought to the group, which was leadership Northouse (2007) "Personal power is the influence capacity a leader derives from being seen by followers as likable and knowledgeable. When leaders act in ways that are important to followers, it gives leaders power" (p. 7). Deidra knew the other girls admired and respected her and what needed to occur was directing her leadership skills to something that would benefit her and possibly the group. It was disheartening in the first year to watch Deidra manipulate the group by making comments that the group was in some way a reporting agency to her. It was also disheartening to ask Deidra to leave the group when she would not comply with basic tenets of no earphones in the group. However, when Deidra had an experience at the museum she started to believe and act in the leadership role that was most conducive to her and to the group. It was a powerful transformation. According to Belgrave (2009), "friends and peers are a strong link to African American girl's competency and achievement… mutually fulfilling friendships can support her psychological development, expectations and well-being" (p. 57). Deidra had much to

offer the group accessing her true potential was of tremendous benefit to her and to the group.

Another example of the SC members benefitting through their own experiences was often in the meetings were a variety of snacks were served. Healthy and diverse foods from many different cultures mostly vegetarian were not always a welcomed treat. As expected many of the participants did not like the food. Not because it was not tasty but more than likely due to the unfamiliarity of the food. They had no problem expressing their dislikes for the food. However, on a field trip to a Jewish Museum we were served a Kosher lunch that consisted of some of the items I served for a snack. The girls were able to identify and enjoy the food being served in the most polite manner. Later the participants giggled and debriefed with me about their reaction to the food and how appropriate they had behaved. They were most proud of themselves as was I.

Evolution. The individual and collective evolution of SC members has been an amazing journey. The intervention was designed to effect the academic, social, and emotional development in these girls. Evolution of thoughts and behavior takes place over time and space; both were needed for the SC to be effective. The evolution of their relationships with each other, teachers, counselors, and administrators on campus by their own account was much different and better since being in the SC. There were descriptive responses such as, "I don't cuss in the classroom anymore," "I don't just get up and walk out;" "I want the teachers to like me now; before I really didn't care." In response I asked how they now handle difficult situations on campus?—a majority of the girls responded with answers that reflected nonviolence such as, "I don't have time for childish stuff," "I just walk away" or "It's really not about that, [fighting] it's about getting an education."

What I found most interesting is the girls saw the change in themselves and how that change had not necessarily changed the perception of others but it was their perception of the relationships and how best to handle the relationship that had changed.

The principal reflected on the growth he had witnessed in the SC when he told a story about having engaged an SC member at a football game and on the following day the same girl would not even speak to him in the hallway. He was happy to report later that in the same year the girls were now acknowledging and speaking to him in the school hallways, even when he did not initiate the interaction. This topic of acknowledging and speaking to people was addressed several times in weekly sessions. The discussions were centered on common courtesies that are extended not only to adults such as principals and teachers, but also to each other. The lesson was simple by merely acknowledging, greeting, or asking someone how he/she is doing, you're extending good will. The lesson was the good will you extend may be all you have as a representation of yourself, particularly when students have been perceived as troublemakers on the campus.

The participants and the program evolved through growing pains. However, both principals gave examples of teachers and staff having less empathy for the issues facing AAFAs than for other female adolescents on the campus. Both principals spoke of the out-and-out neglect and dismissal of the girls by teachers and staff. Basically it is as if they do not exist. The evolution of the school in general was and is still and issue that requires attention.

Comparison of Similar Studies

In similar studies conducted by Belgrave et al (2009), *The Sisters of Nia*, and Stevens (2002), *Growing Up: Learning to Make Choices*, the findings mirrored the SC

Sister Circle as it relates to self-esteem, cultural relevance, and pride. Additionally, both similar studies highlighted the need for the presence of a caring adult. Although mentioned in both studies, the need for safety and a safe place to grow and develop was of major significance in the SC intervention.

Limitations of the Study and Reflections for Change

The SC was born out of an idea expressed by students. The students are African American girls with a desire to belong and to be recognized in a manner that validates their existence in a school setting. Although initially the program addressed students with high numbers of discipline referrals and lower levels of academic achievement, I would not exclude other AAFAs students who may need the same level of support as other AAFAs. While, helpful to the school to have a place to put AAFAs who are most at risk and who have become a problem that the school is not well equipped to deal with, separating AAFAs with the most needs from those who have less need does not necessarily benefit the student in the SC program. I have found in group sessions it would have been helpful to point to someone in the group as a positive example of academic and social ability. I would recruit AAFAs students who did not have the behavior or academic issues to become a mentor in the program. There was one such student who would have been a wonderful role model. She was a good student and had no discipline referrals. I tried to get her involved. She was reluctant as she wanted to stay out of the 'drama' of the other AAFAs in the SC who had a negative reputation. I believe if I had setup a ranking system based on grades and attendance within the SC this would have served as two different levels within the SC and giving those within the SC something to aspire to.

Some teachers offered their opinion about the SC program suggesting the SC needed to be more structured with rules. The SC has operated as a final intervention for many who would more than likely drop out. The effectiveness of the SC is in its ability to have autonomy from school rigidity and individualize the program to address the many complex issues of the SC members. Another aspect of the program that would benefit from change is having the SC program incorporated in the school day by designing an elective class that incorporates writing, leadership, and culture in the curriculum. Also further developing the service component for students to work with feeder middle schools and the AAFA population at feeder schools who experience similar issues, thereby getting in front of the issues before they reach high school.

Sister Circle-type interventions should include a professional licensed counselor with a shared background or experiences to be available for SC members at least once a month. This counselor might attend group sessions as well as smaller individual sessions. In addition, a local school counselor should also be involved regularly.   Although the social and emotional issues were addressed whenever they arose in group sessions it would be beneficial to have at least a monthly session from a licensed practitioner to come in facilitate a group based on issues that may have come up during that month. This of course would mean additional funding and time. In addition to adding a counselor, I would develop teacher training in order to better prepare teachers to work with this specific population in a method that would enable both teacher and student to have a productive relationship that would translate to a better academic outcome.

Research Design Improvements

In future research I would have had an assistant to document and observe from the

start of the research. Prior to the official start of the study when I had one role, that being coordinator of the SC program, my natural instincts were to keep notes, write journal entries and reports, as a tool to reflect and improve any program for which I am responsible. However, once the program became a research study it was difficult to work with students in the group sessions, schedule programming and field trips, home visits, and look with the critical lens that a researcher must have in order to grasp, retain, and document the study. I am assured many nuances and moments were lost and not necessarily captured appropriately. The documentation of qualitative data is far more difficult to write when it is the only task; adding the task of facilitator of the program made it extremely difficult. I believe I would have had to introduce the assistant or documenter early on for the SC participants to trust and accept the presence of an 'outsider' whose responsibility it was to document. I am not sure having a documenter would have given me the same level of discourse in the weekly sessions.

In the second year of the program after the discipline referrals had been greatly reduced, many of the school personnel viewed the SC as a "fixit" or as a dumping ground for the behavior problems of AAFAs on campus. Consequently the program began to have 25 to 30 members in attendance. The program lost the intimacy and did not function well with a large number. Secondly, some of the referrals did not want to be in the group. I needed to remind the teachers and staff the program was voluntary and that was the beauty of the program. The students who attended wanted to be in the SC; it was not designed as a punitive program. The smaller more manageable number of 15-20 students gave the program the time and space to work with students at a comprehensive level. The size of the group needed to be maintained in order to be effective.

Conclusions

       The participants of this program felt a sense of love and care from the adult African American woman who coordinated the program. When asked what the teachers thought of the program, the findings were spilt; half reported that some of the teachers understand the program, meaning the SC program. Others reported that teachers see it as a waste of time. It is completely understandable that some of the teachers understand and realize the benefits of the program and others do not understand the need for a program specifically designed for one population. It simply may be lack of teacher training which has not adequately addressed issues of poverty, personal bias and cultural relevancy.

       Historically, African American women who were active in their communities were often educators who were viewed as a trying to uplift the race. The idea that a teacher in 2011 would see a program for at risk African American girls coordinated by an African American teacher as a waste of time is simply ignorant.

       The importance of African American girls and women to identity and feel empowered by their cultural and legacy has been well documented by Belgrave (2009) Collins (2000, 2009), hooks (1981), and Stevens (2002). The SC intervention program provided a safe place where academic social and emotional development could occur. I found that the academic and social developmental follow the emotional growth. AAFAs develop emotionally when there is the presence of a caring adult who instills hope, provides love, and a gives them a sense of pride. Some educators may not view hope, love, and pride in oneself as academically relevant. I argue that you cannot teach or counsel without it. Some may argue it is the job of the home or family to provide hope, love, and a sense of pride. As an educator and researcher it is not only effortless to

provide altruistic values such as hope, encouragement and love; they are an indispensable.

Implications for Theory, Policy, and Practice

This study reiterates the need for African American women to discover and rely on love, safety, and acceptance for and amongst themselves as a method of support and resiliency. This study also illuminates the need for the concepts of Black Feminist Thought to be taught and acted upon prior to adulthood if AAFAs are to see themselves in society and institutions that often ignore their needs and existence.

The study findings have implications that there are too few counselors to address the social and emotional needs of girls. The curriculum and activities in schools need to be more diverse in areas of history, race, and women studies to more adequately represent the diversity in urban communities. There is strong evidence in this research to support the idea that AAFAs in an urban high school would greatly benefit from the presence of a caring adult and a safe place to develop self-esteem. In the development of self-esteem other negative social factors are mitigated and the AAFAs is able to thrive, and survive those negative social factors to become a successful and productive citizen. AAFAs would benefit from having yearly allocated funding to support and sustain a program such as the SC. The funding spent on the front end of the needs of AAFAs may serve to mitigate the problems and issues that may arise in the future. Simply, it is being proactive rather than reactive.

Areas for Further Research

Funding for longitudinal studies about AAFAs is often focused on drug use and sexual behavior instead of how AAFAs develop academically, socially and emotionally.

This study provided a look into how AAFAs see themselves academically, socially, and emotionally. The SC provides an example of a partnership between a school and a program that can help serve the needs of a marginalized group. Based on this dissertation, such partnerships can help to increase students' emotional and social development. Further research needs to be conducted to better understand this phenomenon. I provide several examples of areas for further longitudinal research.

The bridge from middle to high school. For future research a longitudinal study of an intervention program that follows AAFAs in urban communities from middle to high school would be a compelling study to gauge the effectiveness of having an early intervention program. The possibility of following the current group of SC participants as a study would allow researchers to see what pathways were chosen if the lessons learned in the high school SC intervention impacted their future decisions and how they view themselves post SC.

National survey of interventions serving. The research indicates that there are several prominent scholars researching the experiences of AAFAs such as Belgrave and Stevens across the nation. A survey of best practices amongst programs aimed at helping AAFAs navigate secondary schools toward higher education would allow us to direct policy and research on how AAFAs learn. Also, focusing less on research studies that exclusively focus on deficit model research in regards to AAFAs would be beneficial.

Religion and AAFAs. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the influence of religion in the SC participants' lives emerged repeatedly. From the most common in-class references to the most profound revelations, the SC students often referenced spirituality and religion as vital factors. Further examination of the intersection of

religion/spirituality amongst AAFAs public school students would allow us to better understand elements of spirituality that should be incorporated into intervention programs and public school as a whole.

Recommendations

Based on this research, interventions in high schools and even middle schools in urban communities that are economically challenged would greatly benefit by having a program specifically designed to address the needs of AAFAs on their campus. There should also be a safe-place where AAFAs and other women of color can go to talk and have someone listen to their issues without being judged or corrected. There should also be a counselor/teacher that is trained to facilitate girl talk groups. Additionally, having speakers, mentors, field trips exclusively for girls that address the unique challenges of women of color, helps students to identify successful pathways. Having groups like the SC assist in creating a sisterhood/camaraderie for increased retention, school connectedness, and increased academic performance.

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APPENDIX A

Thematic Units of the SC Curriculum

Thematic Unit 1—Who Am I? Self-Awareness, Self-Esteem, Looking Within for the

Answers, The Importance of Vision.

• Project: Students will complete an individual assessment.

• Visit to local university.

Thematic Unit 2—Where am I going? How do I get there? Positive routines and rituals

for success in life.

• Project: Students will identify a group service project.

• Visit to local university.

Thematic Unit 3—Gratitude and Thanksgiving—The importance of giving back to

yourself, family, school, and community.

• Project: Students will identify an individual service project.

• Visit to local museum.

Thematic Unit 4—Celebrating and incorporating universal principles of life: Unity, Faith,

Self-Determination, Community, Wholeness, Purpose, Creativity, Individual

Responsibility.

• Project: Students will continue working on group service project.

• Participation in the Pan African American Film Festival.

Thematic Unit 5—Reflecting on and learning about our ancestral past. Learning the

history and contributions of women of color and the implications for my life

• Project: Students will research women in their community who have made

significant contributions.

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- Visit to museum.

Thematic Unit 6—Social graces—What are they? Why do I need them? How to use them effectively?

- Project: Students will plan and organize a social event for Jefferson High School.

Thematic Unit 7—Exploring other cultures and their contributions. Why knowledge and respect for other cultures is important to my life.

- Project: Students will write a collective article for the school newspaper on their field trip Chinatown and to Olvera Street.

Thematic Unit 8—Spring into action, planning, and persistence. Now is the time to plan for the summer. Decisions or Distractions,

- Project: Students will plan for individual summer programs/activities with the assistance and guidance of the program director. The program director will assist in facilitating and locating summer camps, work, internships, and volunteer opportunities of interest to students.

Thematic Unit 9—Culminating activity (to be determined by students), transitions, growth reflection, awards ceremony.

- Project: Students will meet individually and collectively with program director to review and assess journal and to determine individual next steps.

APPENDIX B

Parent Permission for Minor to Participate in Research

You are asked to allow your daughter to participate in a research study conducted by Bobbi McDaniel and Anthony Collatos, Ph.D. from the Graduate School of Education and Psychology at Pepperdine University. Your daughter was selected as a possible participant because she participates in the SC Program at Central High School.

Why is this study being conducted?

This study is designed to look at the SC program and its participants and identify perceptions of the participants about the SC. Your daughter will be asked to answer questions about her experiences, thoughts and perceptions about the SC.

What will happen if my daughter takes part in this research?

If you agree to allow your daughter to participate in this study, she would be asked to answer these questions:

1. -What words describe the SC?
2. -What is the purpose of the SC
3. -What happens in the SC?
4. -What do teachers think about the SC?
5. -What do you like about the SC?
6. -What do you dislike about the SC?
7. -Has your behavior changed since you began participating in the SC?
8. -How do you interact with members of the SC?
9. -How do you interact with non-members of the SC?
10.-Has your behavior changed since you began participating in the SC?
—if yes, in what way OR can you point out one thing you do differently as a result of being in the SC?
11. -Are your interactions with teachers, administrators, counselors, different as a result of your participation in the SC?
12. -How do you handle difficult situations on campus?
13. -What field trip, speaker or experience have you liked the best in the SC?
14.-What would you change about the SC?
15. -What would you keep the same about the SC?

I will tape record their responses to the questions. Additionally, some participants will be asked to do an extended interview. In the extended interview the researcher will ask your daughter to elaborate in greater detail about her experiences in the SC.

Additionally, I will review data that I have collected for 2 years about the SC in the form of notes, journal entries and reports that are my personal property. Any information used will not identify your daughter in any form; it will not identify the school or any personal

name, image or reference to your daughter. All information will use pseudonyms.

How long will my daughter be in the research study?

Participation in the study will take approximately one hour to answer the questions. The additional interview, which only some participants will do, will take an additional hour possibly two, which will be scheduled on another day.

Are there any potential risks or discomforts that my child can expect from this study?

Some participants may feel uneasy about discussing their perceptions about the SC.

Are there any potential benefits if my daughter participates?

There are no direct benefits.

Will my daughter receive any payment if she participates in this study?

There will be no payment given for this study. There will be refreshments served during the interview. If selected for an extended interview participants will be provided a meal due to the length of the interview.

Will information about my child's participation be kept confidential?

Yes. Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that identify you will remain confidential. It will be disclosed only with your permission as required by law. Confidentiality will be maintained by means of keeping data in a safe, secure, location at all times. Participants will be assigned an ID number which will identify their audio interview only. No other personal identification will be recorded. The data will be entered onto a password protected computer that only Bobbi McDaniel and Dr. Collatos have access to.

Withdrawal of participation by the investigator?

The investigator may withdraw you from participating in the research if circumstances arise which warrant doing so.

What are my rights if my child takes part in this study?

If you agree to allow your child to be in this study, you may withdraw your permission at any time without consequences of any kind. You are not waving any of your child's legal rights if you choose to allow your daughter to participate in this study. Participants have the right at any point in the research process to stop participation and have the data that they have already provided destroyed. This means that the tape recordings and notes taken during the interviews will be shredded and audio recordings erased.

What will this research be used for?

This research will be published as my dissertation and will not identify your daughter in any way.

Who can answer questions I might have about this study?

If you have any questions you can feel free to contact Bobbi McDaniel at xxx-216-xxxx or bobbi.mcdaniel@pepperdine.edu or Dr. Anthony Collatos at anthony.collatos@pepperdine.edu

If you wish to ask questions about your rights as a research participant or if you wish to voice any problems or concerns you may have about this study to someone other than the researchers, please call:

The Office of the Human Research
Graduate and Professional School IRB
c/o Jean Kang, GPS IRB Manager
Graduate School of Education & Psychology
Pepperdine University
310 568-5753
6100 Center Drive 5th Floor
Los Angeles, CA 90045

If you agree to your daughter's participation in the extended interviews please sign the attached permission slip.

Thank you,
Bobbi McDaniel

APPENDIX C

Participant Assent Letter

My name is Bobbi McDaniel, and I am doctoral student in the Graduate School of Education at Pepperdine University. Your parents have given me their permission to speak with you about a study I am conducting on The Sister Circle Program and the effects of the program may have had on you. I would like to invite you to participate in this study if you are interested. Before I explain more about the study, I want you to know that the choice to participate is completely up to you. No one is going to force you to do something you are not interested in doing. Even if you start the study and decide that you are no longer interested in continuing, just let me know and we will discontinue the study.

If you decide not to participate in the study or drop out of the study you will not be dropped from the Sister Circle Program. Interviews will never be scheduled during school hours.

Let me tell you about what you will be asked to do if you decide to participate in this study:

I will interview you after school for about an hour and ask you questions about the Sister Circle program. The questions will be about the Sister Circle, how you like and dislike it, your behavior since becoming a member of the Sister Circle, activities, speakers, and field trips of the Sister Circle.

I will ask questions about discussions we have had around the topics we discuss in the Sister Circle such as classes at your school, teachers at your school, relationships with your friends, and goals for the future. If at any time you do not want to talk about anything including the topics I have mentioned, you do not have to.

In addition, I will review my personal notes, journal entries and reports that I have kept as my personnel records about the program, the activities and the meetings we have conducted over the past two years. Any information used will not identify you in any form; it will not identify the school or any personal name, image or reference to you. All information will use different names or identifiers

I will be tape recording our interviews. I will keep the tape recording in a safe place where I will be the only one that has access to the recordings. If at any time you would like me to turn the tape recorder off, you can request that I do so.

The interviews will be conducted in the Principal's Conference room after school and the interviews will not last over one hour. At the end of the interview if you would like to speak further we can schedule another meeting. The time frame for conducting the interviews will be April 1, 2011-May 31, 2011.

If you get bored or tired during our meeting, just let me know, and we can take a break. If you are bothered by some of the things we talk about, let me know so we can talk about what is bothering you or we can skip any question you like.

There will be limited access to your individual interview data granted to me, my chair Dr. Collatos. No one else will see your individual answers to your interview..

No interviews will be transcribed.

The only disclosures to school personnel are sexual or physical abuse and/or if you tell me you are going to hurt yourself or someone else.

Your participation in this study may not provide information that will be helpful to you, but what is hoped is that what I find out from you may be of help in the future to others who are undergoing similar experiences.

When the results of this study are published or presented to professional audiences, the names of the people who participated in the study will not be revealed.

 If you have any questions, you may contact me at (*xxx-216-xxxx*).

I agree to participate in the research study being conducted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a dissertation by Bobbi McDaniel, under the direction of Dr. Anthony Collatos.

Your signature on each line indicates your permission regarding each item. You are not required to agree to all or any of the items below.

_____   _____

Sister Circle Participant to Participate in Study (Youth) signature   Date

_____   _____

Sister Circle Participant (Youth) signature approving Audio Taping   Date

_____   _____

Sister Circle Participant (Youth) signature approving Additional Interviews   Date

_____   _____

Sister Circle Participant (Youth) signature use of Program Notes   Date

_____   _____

Researcher's signature   Date Assent Obtained

APPENDIX D

Informed Consent for Participation in Research Activities

Participant: _____

Principal Investigator: Bobbi McDaniel

Title of Project: The Sister Circle Program: An Examination of an Intervention Program

1. I agree to participate in the research study being conducted by Bobbi McDaniel under the direction of Dr. Anthony Collatos.

2. *The overall purpose of this research is:*

The overall purpose of this research project is to examine the effects and perceptions of the SC Program on its participants, teachers, and administrators.

3. *My participation will involve the following*:

    1. Speaking about perceptions and opinions of the SC.
    2. Allowing the review of data collected by the researcher which will includes notes, journal entries, and reports about the SC.

4. *I understand that the possible benefits to myself or society from this research are:*

The possible benefit to myself and society is that I provide access and a deeper knowledge into the educational lives of African American girls on urban high school campuses. This study may influence or inform educational practices and a broader understanding of the world's diversity.

5. *I understand that there are certain risks and discomforts that might be associated with this research. These risks include:*

I may experience some emotional uneasiness during the interview.

6. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I may refuse to participate and/or withdraw my consent and discontinue participation in the project or activity at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which I am otherwise entitled. In addition, I will not be interviewed during my work hours.

7. I understand that the investigator(s) will take all reasonable measures to protect the confidentiality of my records and my identity will not be revealed in any publication that may result from this project. The confidentiality of my records will be maintained in accordance with applicable state and federal laws. Under California law, there are exceptions to confidentiality, including suspicion that a child, elder, or dependent adult is being abused, or if an individual discloses an intent to harm him/herself or others. I understand there is a possibility that my medical record, including identifying information, may be inspected and/or photocopied by officials of the Food and Drug Administration or other federal or state government agencies during the ordinary course of carrying out their functions. If I participate in a sponsored research

project, a representative of the sponsor may inspect my research records.

I understand that the investigator is willing to answer any inquiries I may have concerning the research herein described. I understand that I may contact (*insert name and contact information for faculty supervisor or other collaborator*) if I have other questions or concerns about this research. If I have questions about my rights as a research participant, I understand that I can contact:

Graduate and Professional School IRB
c/o Jean Kang, GPS IRB Manager
Graduate School of Education & Psychology
Pepperdine University
310-568-5753
6100 Center Drive 5th Floor
Los Angeles, CA 90045

8. I will be informed of any significant new findings developed during the course of my participation in this research which may have a bearing on my willingness to continue in the study.

9. I understand that in the event of physical injury resulting from the research procedures in which I am to participate, no form of compensation is available. Medical treatment may be provided at my own expense or at the expense of my health care insurer which may or may not provide coverage. If I have questions, I should contact my insurer.

10. I understand to my satisfaction the information regarding participation in the research project. All my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I have received a copy of this informed consent form which I have read and understand. I hereby consent to participate in the research described above.

|	
Parent or legal guardian's signature on participant's behalf if participant is less than 18 years of age or not legally competent.	Participant's Signature
	Date
_____	
Date	Witness
	Date

I have explained and defined in detail the research procedure in which the subject has consented to participate. Having explained this and answered any questions, I am cosigning this form and accepting this person's consent.
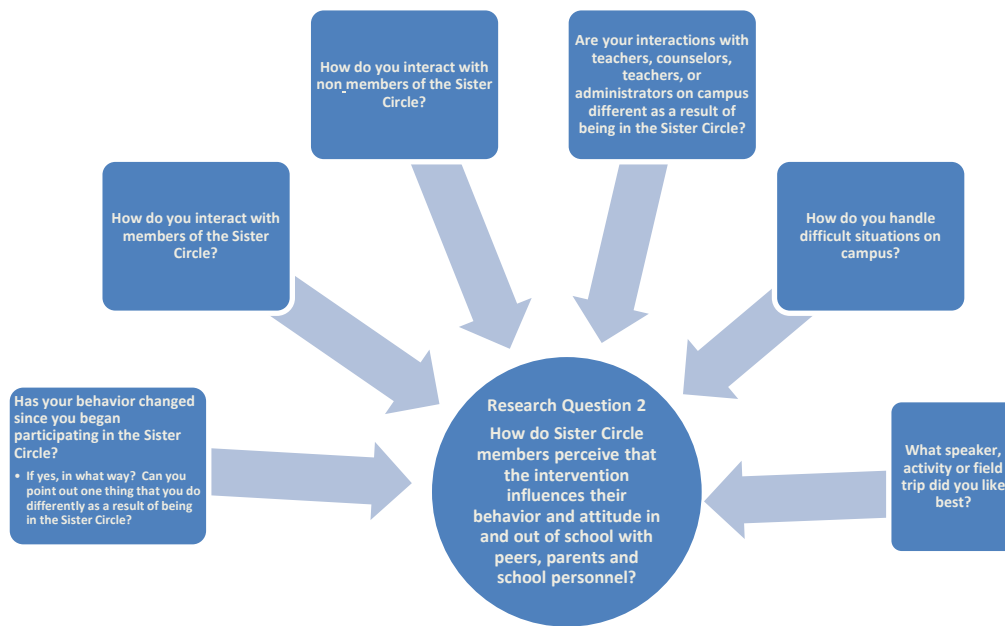
Principal Investigator	Date

APPENDIX E

Coding Research Question 1 Correlation
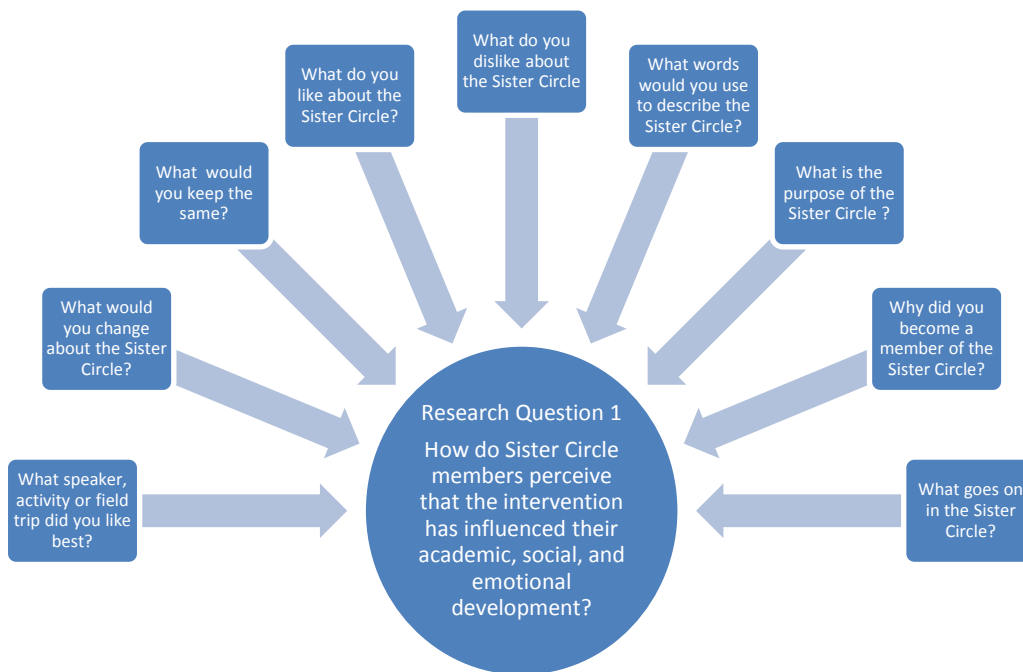
APPENDIX F

Coding Research Question 2 Correlation

How do you interact with non members of the Sister Circle?

Are your interactions with teachers, counselors, teachers, or administrators on campus different as a result of being in the Sister Circle?

How do you interact with members of the Sister Circle?

How do you handle difficult situations on campus?

Has your behavior changed since you began participating in the Sister Circle?
- If yes, in what way? Can you point out one thing that you do differently as a result of being in the Sister Circle?

Research Question 2
How do Sister Circle members perceive that the intervention influences their behavior and attitude in and out of school with peers, parents and school personnel?

What speaker, activity or field trip did you like best?

APPENDIX G

SC Questions: For Teachers, Counselors, and Administrators

1. What is the purpose of the SC?

2. What happens in the SC?

3. Name three words you would use to describe the SC program?

4. Name three words you would use to describe the SC members?

5. What is your opinion of the SC?

6. Do school personnel generally have time to effectively work with the members of the SC members?

7. How do you interact with members of the SC?

8. How do you interact with non-members of the SC?

9. Have you heard or do you have complaints about the SC members?

    a. If yes, what are they?

10. Are SC members ignored? By Staff, by other students?

11. To what extent are SC members tolerated? By Staff, By other Students?

12. Has the SC impacted the school climate?

    a. If yes, in what way?

13. What would you change about the SC?

    a. What would you keep the same?

14. Have you seen change in the behavior of girls who participate in the SC and if yes, how?

APPENDIX H

IRB Approval

PEPPERDINE UNIVERSITY

Graduate & Professional Schools Institutional Review Board

April 25, 2011

Bobbi Mc Daniel
P.O. Box 8655
Los Angeles, CA 90008

Protocol #: E0311D18
Project Title: *An Examination of an Intervention Program: The Sister Circle Dissertation*

Dear Ms. Mc Daniel:

Thank you for submitting your revised IRB application, *An Examination of an Intervention Program: The Sister Circle Dissertation,* to Pepperdine's Graduate and Professional Schools Institutional Review Board (GPS IRB). The IRB has reviewed your revised submitted IRB application and all ancillary materials. As the nature of the research met the requirements for expedited review under provision Title 45 CFR 46.110 (research category 7) of the federal Protection of Human Subjects Act, the IRB conducted a formal, but expedited, review of your application materials.

I am pleased to inform you that your application for your study was granted **Full Approval.** The IRB approval begins today, **April 25, 2011** and terminates on **April 25, 2012**.

Your final consent forms and assent form have been stamped by the IRB to indicate the expiration date of study approval. One copy of the consent forms and assent form are enclosed with this letter and one copy has been retained for our records. **You can only use copies of the consent forms and assent form that have been stamped with the GPS IRB expiration date to obtain consent and assent from your participants.**

Please note that your research must be conducted according to the proposal that was submitted to the GPS IRB. If changes to the approved protocol occur, a revised protocol must be reviewed and approved by the IRB before implementation. For *any* proposed changes in your research protocol, please submit a **Request for Modification Form** to the GPS IRB. Please be aware that changes to your protocol may prevent the research from qualifying for expedited review and require submission of a new IRB application or other materials to the GPS IRB. If contact with subjects will extend beyond **April 25, 2012**, a **Continuation or Completion of Review Form** must be submitted at least **one month prior** to the expiration date of study approval to avoid a lapse in approval. These forms can be found on the IRB website at http://services.pepperdine.edu/irb/irbforms/#Apps.

A goal of the IRB is to prevent negative occurrences during any research study. However, despite our best intent, unforeseen circumstances or events may arise during the research. If an unexpected situation or adverse event happens during your investigation, please notify the GPS IRB as soon as possible. We will ask for a complete explanation of the event and your response. Other actions also may be required depending on the nature of the event. Details regarding the timeframe in which adverse events must be reported to the GPS IRB and the appropriate form to be used to report this information can be found in the *Pepperdine University Protection of Human Participants in Research: Policies and Procedures Manual* (see link to "policy material" at http://www.pepperdine.edu/irb/graduate/).

Please refer to the protocol number denoted above in all further communication or correspondence related to this approval. Should you have additional questions, please contact me. On behalf of the GPS IRB, I wish you success in this scholarly pursuit.

6100 Center Drive, Los Angeles, California 90045 ▪ 310-568-5600

APPENDIX I

LAUSD Committee on External Research Permission for the Study

Dear Researcher:

I am pleased to inform you that the proposed study 11316, "An examination of an intervention program, the Sister Circle," was approved by the LAUSD Committee on External Research Review. Once we have verified that your proposal package is complete, including a signed statement of agreement and IRB approval from your institution, our office will follow with a formal approval letter. You are free to proceed with data collection once you have received the formal approval letter.

Please be aware that this approval is valid for one year's time at which point our office will follow up with the sponsoring institution to learn about the study's progress and findings of interest to the district. You will have the opportunity then to renew approval of the proposal should additional time be required for data collection or if modifications to the original proposal are necessary.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions or thoughts. Thanks.

Sincerely,

Katherine Hayes, Ph.D.
Program Evaluation & Research Coordinator
Research Unit, School Report Card Team
Office of Data and Accountability
LAUSD
333 S. Beaudry Ave, 16th Floor
Los Angeles, CA 90017
213-241-5153

APPENDIX J

Sister Circle Questions for Students

1. What words would you use to describe the SC?

2. What is the purpose of the SC ?

3. Why did you become a member of the SC?

4. What goes on in the SC?

5. What do teachers think about the SC?

6. What do you like about the SC?

7. What do you dislike about the SC

8. Has your behavior changed since you began participating in the SC?

    a. If yes, in what way? Can you point out one thing that you do differently as a
       result of being in the SC?

9. How do you interact with members of the SC?

10. How do you interact with nonmembers of the SC?

11. Are your interactions with teachers, counselors, teachers, or administrators on campus
    different as a result of being in the SC?

12. How do you handle difficult situations on campus?

13. What speaker, activity or field trip did you like best?

14. What would you change about the SC?

15. What would you keep the same?