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# Talking Circles For Adolescent Girls In An Urban High School: A Restorative Practices Program For Building Friendships And Developing Emotional Literacy Skills

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**TALKING CIRCLES FOR ADOLESCENT GIRLS  
IN AN URBAN HIGH SCHOOL: A RESTORATIVE PRACTICES PROGRAM  
FOR BUILDING FRIENDSHIPS AND DEVELOPING  
EMOTIONAL LITERACY SKILLS**

by

**MARTHA ANN SCHUMACHER**

**DISSERTATION**

Submitted to the Graduate School

of Wayne State University,

Detroit, Michigan

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

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**MAJOR: COMMUNICATION**

Approved by

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Advisor

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Date

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments.....	ii
List of Tables .....	viii
INTRODUCING THE PROJECT .....	1
Scope of Dissertation.....	3
Chapter Descriptions .....	6
CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCING THE LITERATURE .....	9
Restorative Justice: History, Practices and Processes .....	9
Philosophy of Restorative Justice.....	10
Historical Roots of Restorative Justice.....	11
Restorative Justice in Courts .....	11
Restorative Justice in Schools .....	12
Whole-School Paradigm and Restorative Justice Practices .....	14
Types of Circles in Restorative Justice and Restorative Practices.....	15
The Care Paradigm: Restorative Justice and Schools.....	15
School Connectedness and the Need to Belong .....	17
Creating a Caring School Community .....	19
Girls: Gender Issues and the Relational Cultural Theory .....	21
Signs of Trouble .....	21
Girls in the Juvenile Justice System .....	22
Relational Cultural Theory .....	24
Emotional Literacy: Developing Skills in Schools.....	25

CHAPTER 2 DESCRIBING RESEARCH METHODS, SITE AND PARTICIPANTS .....	28
The Interpretive Paradigm and Ethnography.....	29
Research Site: A Multicultural Urban High School .....	30
Gaining Entry .....	33
Gatekeepers .....	34
School Climate .....	34
Selection of Participants: Adolescent Girls .....	36
Setting up the Talking Circles .....	38
Circle Site .....	38
Organizational Structure .....	39
Circle Ceremonies .....	42
Challenges .....	43
Data Collection Techniques.....	46
Participant Observations.....	46
Field Notes.....	47
Memo-Writing.....	48
Semi-Structured and Focused Group Interviews.....	48
Data Analysis Techniques .....	51
Verification of Trustworthiness.....	52
CHAPTER 3 MEETING THE CIRCLES .....	55
Circle of Surprise (#1) .....	56
Circle of Silence (#2).....	63
Circle of Congeniality (#3).....	69

Circle of Social Responsibility (#4) .....	76
Circle of Diversity (#5).....	80
Circle of Playfulness (#6) .....	86
Circle of Volatility (#7) .....	94
Circle of Resilience (#8) .....	102
Circle of Choices (#9).....	109
<b>CHAPTER 4 BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS .....</b>	<b>118</b>
Structural Elements Influencing Dynamics of Relationship Building .....	119
Talking Piece .....	119
Reflective Inquiry .....	124
Adult Circle Keeper.....	126
Relational Themes Emerging in the Talking Circle .....	130
First Theme: Joy of Being Together and Building Friendships .....	130
Second Theme: Feeling Safe with Each Other.....	134
Third Theme: Being Free to Express Genuine Emotions.....	140
Fourth Theme: Cultivating Empathy.....	144
<b>CHAPTER 5 DAWNING OF AWARENESS .....</b>	<b>150</b>
Evidence of Emotional Literacy Development.....	152
First Sign: Improved Capacity to Listen .....	152
Second Sign: Better Management of Anger and Conflict Situations .....	155
Third Sign: Becoming More Sensitive to Others .....	165
Evidence of Self-Efficacy .....	171
First Sign: Gaining Confidence .....	171

Second Sign: Feeling Empowered to Speak Their Voice .....	174
CHAPTER 6 TRANSFERRING AWARENESS INTO ACTION .....	178
Peers Helping Peers .....	178
Group Support .....	179
Individual Support .....	186
Practical Application of Learned Skills .....	190
Using Conflict Resolution Techniques .....	190
Organizing Circles to Address Conflict .....	194
Serving as Role Models .....	200
For Elementary Students .....	200
For Middle School Students .....	203
For High School Students .....	206
CHAPTER 7 CONCLUDING THOUGHTS .....	209
Nurturing Growth-Fostering Relationships (RQ1) .....	211
Elements of Friendship .....	211
Characteristics of Growth-Fostering Relationships: “Five Good Things” .....	212
Safety and Trust Factors .....	215
Communication Styles Used in Building Relationships .....	217
Developing Emotional Literacy Skills (RQ2) .....	218
Circle Environment for Emotional Literacy Work: Yalom’s Curative Factors .....	219
Social and Emotional Learning .....	222
Increased Self-Efficacy (RQ2) .....	224



Behavioral Changes Noted by Principal and Vice-Principal.....	225
Challenges to Circle Process and Circle Keeper .....	227
Addressing Broken Circle Rules .....	227
Mixing Age Groups.....	231
Handling Sudden Onset of Interpersonal Conflict .....	233
Theoretical Implications .....	236
Brief Summary of Theoretical Framework .....	236
The Relational Cultural Theory and Talking Circles .....	238
Significance of Research .....	239
Statement of Limitations and Future Research.....	240
Final Words .....	244
EPILOGUE.....	246
Appendix A: Notes taken during Circle meetings (CN).....	248
Appendix B: Field notes (FN).....	251
Appendix C: Interview data with students, gatekeepers and staff (IN) .....	252
Appendix D: Sample semi-structured interview questions for students .....	253
Appendix E: Internal Review Board Approval of Research.....	255
References.....	256
Abstract .....	281
Autobiographical Statement.....	283

## LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Circles, Participants, Ethnic Background, Grade Level and Period Active.....55

## INTRODUCING THE PROJECT

Since the 1990s, as schools face the repercussions of tough disciplinary sanctions with rising rates of suspensions and expulsions, some administrators have turned to the practices and principles of Restorative Justice for addressing behavioral problems and interpersonal conflict (Karp & Breslin, 2001; Stinchcomb, Bazemore, & Riestenberg, 2006). Case studies of schools implementing Restorative Justice practices as a response to wrongdoing report steady declines in suspensions, expulsions and behavioral referrals (Cameron & Thorsborne, 2001; International Institute of Restorative Practices, 2009; Karp & Breslin, 2001; McCluskey et al., 2008; McCold, 2002; Riestenberg, 2004; Stinchcomb, Bazemore, & Riestenberg, 2006; Wachtel & Mirsky, 2008). The juvenile justice courts are documenting lower recidivism rates for adolescents involved in Restorative Justice programs when compared to those in control groups (Bradshaw & Roseborough, 2005; McCold, 2002; McRae & Zehr, 2004; Rodriguez, 2007; Umbreit, Coates, & Vos, 2001).

What does the Restorative Justice movement offer that is different from the traditional punitive approach to indiscipline or wrongdoing? Restorative Justice, which focuses on relationship building, addresses anti-social and harmful behavior by shifting the emphasis from blame and punishment to one focused on responsibility, accountability, nurturance and restoration (Braithwaite, 1989; Zehr, 2002). The primary practice of Restorative Justice is direct consensual dialogue between those who have harmed and those who have been harmed to work out restitution, improve their relationship if feasible, and reintegrate the one who harmed into the law-abiding community whenever possible (Johnstone, 2002; Zehr, 2002). It is a method that is grounded both in the ethics of justice

and the ethics of care (Gilligan, 1982; Held, 2006; Noddings, 2003a, 2003b, 2005)

While results in dealing with wrongdoing are encouraging in both the juvenile justice system and schools, many school administrators and scholars are advocating for a whole-school cultural and climate change that prevents disruptive behavior from occurring in the first place by focusing on restorative curriculums, restorative dialogues and restorative ethos building (Cameron & Thorsborne, 2001; Hopkins, 2004; International Institute for Restorative Practices, 2010; Monk, 2010; Morrison, 2002, 2005; Morrison, Blood, & Thorsborne, 2005; Riestenberg, 2012). They see Restorative Justice evolving from a tool of intervention to a tool of prevention, grounded in healthy relationships, respectful listening and speaking, and community spirit.

To this end, some researchers and administrators use the term “Restorative Practices” (RP) or “Restorative Measures,” rather than “Restorative Justice,” to draw a clear line between the proactive/reactive Restorative Practices taking place in schools, and the Restorative Justice programs that focus on wrongdoing in the juvenile justice system (Karp & Breslin, 2001; McCluskey et al., 2008; Wachtel, 2004). Today, however, the terms are used interchangeably in restorative literature and I will do the same except when discussing the research site of this dissertation, which adopted the term “Restorative Practices” in its school district.<sup>1</sup>

The Circle, both its configuration and process as a nonhierarchical communication tool that supports the principles of interrelatedness, equality, and power

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<sup>1</sup> In this context, Restorative Practices serves as an ‘umbrella term’ that covers a broad range of techniques, strategies and processes, which not only address conflict and wrongdoing, but also encourage the development of social and self discipline, emotional literacy skills, social support and social capital.

sharing, is a *key component* of Restorative Justice programs in schools and the juvenile courts. As a group process, Circles have a long history in human communication, and there is effort today, both inside and outside the field of Restorative Justice, to bring the Circle back into common practice (Baldwin, 1994; Baldwin & Linnea, 2010; Ball, Caldwell, & Pranis, 2010; Bolen, 1999; Boyes-Watson & Pranis, 2010; Pranis, 2005; Roa, Irvine, & Cervantez, 2007; Palmer, 2004; Riestenberg, 2012; Wolf & Welton, 2005). This is especially true for *Talking Circles*, which are rooted in the peacemaking and storytelling traditions of indigenous people of North America who gathered together to heal harm or discuss important community issues. Community, in fact, was built through the life of the Circle (Pranis, 2005; Sullivan & Tifft, 2005). Over the last 40 years, Talking Circles have evolved among non-indigenous groups for the purposes of building relationships and personal growth through the sharing of private stories and emotions within the confines of a safe, supportive community (Boyes-Watson, 2008; Boyes-Watson & Pranis, 2010; Girls Circle Association, 2011; Pranis, 2005; Teen Talking Circles, 2011; Umbreit, 2003; Wolf & Welton, 2005).

### **Scope of Dissertation**

Moved by research of the last fifteen years that draws an association between school connectedness *and* teen health and wellbeing (Eccles et al., 1997; McNeely, Nonnemaker, & Blum, 2002; Resnick et al., 1997; Search Institute, 2006), and by recent research on the rise of adolescent girls' relational aggression (Artz, 2005; Prothrow-Stith & Spivak, 2005; Wiseman, 2002), use of antidepressants (Olfson & Marcus, 2009) and

levels of anxiety (Twenge, 2000), I wondered whether out-of-classroom Talking Circles,<sup>2</sup> held in a private and safe space with five to six girls, might be introduced in high schools to help nurture peer relationships, develop emotional literacy skills, and address gender-specific issues. Many books were already describing the powerful experience of speaking and listening from the heart, as well as the potential for deeply connecting with others, in *Circles* (Baldwin & Linnea, 2010; Boyes-Watson, 2008; Boyes-Watson & Pranis, 2010; Hossfeld & Taormina, 2007; Wachtel, O'Connell, & Wachtel, 2010; Pranis, 2005; Riestenberg, 2012; Wolf & Welton, 2005). Other emerging research was pointing to the positive outcomes of classroom Circles for addressing classroom issues before they escalated, building community spirit, and teaching curriculum (Buckley & Maxwell, 2007; Costello, Wachtel, & Wachtel, 2010; McCold, 2002; Riestenberg, 2004).

As a researcher, I was more interested in systematically studying smaller, gender-specific Circles, held out of the classroom, which focused specifically on relational connections, personal growth, social emotional learning, and self-empowerment tools for everyday life. Educational research was pointing to the academic and emotional benefits of building closer relationships among students and with staff (Blum, McNeeley, & Rinehart, 2002; Resnick et al., 1997). Others were advocating gender-specific school programs for girls before they got into trouble with the law (Chesney-Lind, 2004). Supporters of whole-school Restorative Practices were espousing proactive programs that spoke to students' social emotional needs (Hopkins, 2004; Riestenberg, 2004; Wachtel &

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<sup>2</sup> This kind of Talking Circle, which uses the talking piece, is defined as an *ongoing weekly Circle* in school that meets *out of the classroom* with small groups of students for the specific purpose of building growth-fostering relationships, developing emotional literacy skills, and mentoring.

Mirsky, 2008). I, therefore, thought small Talking Circles might address some of these concerns for the schools.

Having been trained in Restorative Practices and in both the Talking and Peacemaking Circle formats, I therefore organized and served as Circle Keeper of 12 different Talking Circles for 60 adolescent girls in a metropolitan high school in the United States. My intention was to document both the *process* and the *meaning* the girls gave to the experience of participating in small, gender-specific Circles. The Talking Circles, which met for 257 hours between February 2010 and December 2011 and are the topic of this ethnographic dissertation, were established within the framework of the local school district's newly implemented Restorative Practices program. Nine of the 12 Circles provide the bulk of the data for this dissertation. The other three Circles which formed in spring, 2010 (when I first began the project) only lasted that short semester—two ended due to graduating seniors and out-of-district moves; the third morphed into a new Circle, which became part of the nine Circles highlighted.

While my initial musings about the potential impact of Talking Circles in schools served as signposts for organizing and framing my ideas, the following two research interests guided the overall inquiry of the study:

Research Question (RQ) 1: Would the girls be able to co-create a safe Circle space that encouraged *growth-fostering relationships*, which, according to the Relational Cultural Theory, focus on greater authenticity, mutual empathy and mutual empowerment (Jordan, 2010)? If so, what relational themes and patterns emerged to provide evidence of such relationships?

Research Question (RQ) 2: Would the Circle environment be conducive for *developing emotional literacy skills* (Bocchino, 1999; Goleman, 1995; Weare, 2004) and *encouraging self-efficacy* (Bandura, 1994)? If so, what evidence supported this skill building and were they able to apply this knowledge in their everyday life?

### **Chapter Descriptions**

Building on these core questions, the dissertation is divided into the following seven chapters:

Chapter 1, *Introducing the Literature*, provides the backdrop for this study by describing the grassroots movement of Restorative Justice and the subsequent introduction of Restorative Practices to schools interested in a whole-school restorative approach for dealing with harmful actions and promoting pro social behavior. This chapter highlights the Relational Cultural Theory as the theoretical framework for viewing the relational dynamics occurring within the Circle and surveys current literature on teaching emotional literacy skills in schools.

Chapter 2, *Describing the Research Methods, Site and Participants*, provides a rationale for selecting ethnography as the research method of choice, as well as a description of the research site, selection of participants and data collection techniques. This chapter may be of particular interest to the practitioner since it outlines the structure of the Circle, explains the ceremonies used in the beginning of the Circles, and discusses some of the challenges I faced organizing out-of-classroom Circles within a school context.

Chapter 3, *Meeting the Circles*, details 9 of the 12 Circles—each with their own unique personality and individual teen voices that vary significantly in substance and



context. They are short narratives written to provide a glimpse into the world of Circles from my perspective as both an insider (Circle Keeper) and outsider (researcher). More than likely the girls would describe their Circles in a much different light.

Chapter 4, *Building Relationships*, addresses the first research question by focusing on the relational themes and patterns that emerged in the Circles and in the self-report data collected from the semi-structured interviews. They include the joy of being together, feeling safe with each other, feeling free to share authentic emotions, and cultivating empathy. Before delving into the themes and patterns, however, I examine three structural elements of the Circles—the talking piece, reflective inquiry and the Circle Keeper—all of which impacted the relational dynamics.

Chapter 5, *Dawning of Awareness*, looks at evidence of social emotional learning and self-efficacy gleaned from participant observations in the Circles and self-report data from the interviews. This chapter addresses the second research question by focusing on three prominent signs of emotional literacy growth—improved capacity to listen, managing anger and conflict situations, and becoming more sensitive to others. Signs of self-efficacy included reported self-confidence and a sense of empowerment.

Chapter 6, *Transferring Awareness into Action*, provides self-report evidence by eight of the girls who changed certain aspects of their lives, or the lives of others, for the better as a result of the social emotional learning skills they acquired in the Circle. This chapter addresses the application portion of the second research question.

Chapter 7, *Concluding Thoughts*, highlights the importance of conducting systematic observations, such as this ethnographic study, for the new and emerging field of Restorative Justice and Restorative Practices in schools. This type of research not only

introduces to the Restorative Justice and Restorative Practices' vocabulary a theory from another discipline, such as the Relational Cultural Theory, but it also offers a starting point for further dialogue among practitioners interested in introducing similar Talking Circles to their school communities.

In closing, many scholars and practitioners have written eloquently about the potential and power of the Circle for youth development and the reparation of peer, family and community relationships (Baldwin & Linnea, 2010; Boyes-Watson, 2008; Boyes-Watson & Pranis, 2010; Costello, Wachtel, & Wachtel, 2010; Hossfeld, 2008; Roa, Irvine, & Cervantez, 2007; Wachtel, O'Connell, & Wachtel, 2010; Pranis, 2005; Riestenberg, 2012; Wolf & Welton, 2005). The following research, presented from the perspective of an ethnographer and practitioner, is a continuation of that work.

## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCING THE LITERATURE

Four bodies of research are relevant to and provide the foundation upon which this dissertation is grounded: a) Restorative Justice – its history, practices and processes; b) Paradigm of Care—its role in Restorative Justice and Restorative Practices in schools; c) Girls—gender issues in society and juvenile justice system, and the Relational-Cultural Theory; and d) Emotional Literacy—teaching the skills in schools. While this dissertation has drawn on the wisdom of broader academic fields, such as education, justice, communication, psychology and sociology, it has its own trajectory—a path towards the knowledge and wisdom of adolescent girls on a journey that we took together into their world of peer friendships, inner personal growth and hidden dreams of the future.

### **Restorative Justice: History, Practices and Processes**

Why are the practices and principles of Restorative Justice being brought into schools nationwide today? What is it about the restorative philosophy that resonates with educators? Some answers may come from the school district in which I conducted my research. Faced with a high rate of expulsions and suspensions, key administrative stakeholders turned to Restorative Practices as a more creative and purposeful way in managing offending or disruptive behavior in their schools. At the time, there were few alternatives to the zero tolerance policy,<sup>3</sup> which they believed was not working.

Zero tolerance policies are designed to uproot harmful behavior and send a stark message of deterrence, but their side effects have hidden costs (Stinchcomb, Bazemore,

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<sup>3</sup> Zero tolerance is a specific school policy that automatically and severely punishes students for a variety of infractions, which may include non-compliant behavior, having or selling drugs, weapon possession, smoking, making threats, swearing, and bullying.

& Riestenberg, 2006). A review of empirically documented side effects from both internal and external school suspensions suggests that students experience peer stigma, loss of self-esteem, higher drop out rates, and an increased chance of becoming part of the legal system (Costenbader & Markson, 1998). A Zero Tolerance Task Force report, issued by the American Psychological Association in 2006, clearly shows that the hardcore policies neither reduce violence nor improve school climate, safety, or learning (Skiba et al., 2006). In fact, the report called for a change of policy and suggested implementing Restorative Justice practices and principles as an alternative for handling misbehavior and harm. Some leaders began seeking ways to build, rather than destroy, students' relationships within the school and their students' wider social community (Cameron & Thorsborne, 2001; McCold & Wachtel, 1998; Riestenberg, 2004).

### **Philosophy of Restorative Justice.**

What are the principles of Restorative Justice? Instead of seeing misconduct as a violation of the school and its rules, or the legal system, which requires some form of retribution, Restorative Justice looks at misbehavior and indiscipline as a violation against people and relationships that need to be healed or repaired (Braithwaite, 2007; Cameron & Thorsborne, 2001; Zehr, 2002). Therefore, any response to misconduct focuses both on restoring the victim to wholeness, as well as helping offenders understand the impact of their behavior and their responsibility to repair the harm. This means that all parties with a stake in an offense must work collectively to deal with the aftermath of the offense and with implications for the future (Marshall, 1996; Zehr, 2002). Underlying this entire process and the Restorative Justice theory is a value system that

embodies how we want to *be* with each other in relationship. It is an ideology of reparation based not only on justice, but also on caring.

### **Historical roots of Restorative Justice.**

The roots of the Restorative Justice theory can be traced back to 1974 when the first victim-offender mediation took place in Elmira, Ontario with two teenage boys who agreed to restitution following a vandalism spree (McCold, 2006). The theory continued to evolve in the 1980s when victim's rights activists joined forces with the 'alternatives to incarceration' movement and "challenged the capacity of the criminal judicial system to respond to the needs of victims" (Elliott & Gordon, 2005, p. xiv). This led to the development and implementation of Restorative Justice models, such as *Family Group Conferencing or Restorative Conferencing*, in the juvenile justice systems in New Zealand and Australia (MacRae & Zehr, 2004; Wachtel, O'Connell, & Wachtel, 2010), and to *Sentencing Circles* in Canada, inspired by the councils of the First Nations communities and designed to replace sentencing in the formal justice system (Lilles, 2002).

### **Restorative Justice in courts.**

In a meta-analysis of existing literature on the effectiveness of Restorative Justice practices in the courts, Latimer, Dowden and Muise (2005) found that Restorative Justice programs "are a more effective method of improving victim and/or offender satisfaction, increasing offender compliance with restitution, and decreasing the recidivism of offenders when compared to more traditional criminal justice responses, such as incarceration, probation, and court-ordered restitution" (p. 138). In another study on recidivism effects of Restorative Conferencing, Australian authors Sherman, Strang and

Woods (2000) observed a decline in violent crimes and drunk driving, but no difference in juvenile property offenders or shoplifters. They concluded that Restorative Justice is effective, but may not be effective for all types of offenses.

Rodriguez (2007), however, focused on juvenile property offenders and reported that those in the Restorative Justice program had slightly lower recidivism rates than those in the comparison group. This was particularly true among girls and first-time offenders (p. 371). Even with the self-selection bias in some studies (which is an inherent problem in Restorative Justice research) or the lack of control over field effects, the decline in recidivism of most crimes, victim satisfaction, and reduction in court load supports the continuation of Restorative Justice practices in the court systems (Clairmont, 2005; McCold & Wachtel, 1998; McCold & Wachtel, 2002).

#### **Restorative Justice in schools.**

As mentioned above, because of repercussions from the zero tolerance policy, the underlying principles of Restorative Justice began to gain a foothold in the educational system as well. It was first introduced to schools in Queensland, Australia in 1994, when a guidance counselor turned to Restorative Conferencing to repair harm that had occurred after a high school dance (Morrison, 2005). Since then it has spread worldwide. Studies conducted in New Zealand (Buckley & Maxwell, 2007; Wearmouth, Mckinney, & Glynn, 2007), Canada (Calhoun, 2000); Australia (Cameron & Thorsborne, 2001; Centre for Restorative Justice, 2009; Morrison, 2002); and Great Britain (Youth Justice Board for England and Wales, 2004) all attest to varying levels of effectiveness of school-based Restorative Conferencing or Circles for handling behavioral problems such as truancy, property damage, theft, and some drug-related issues (Morrison, 2005). Others report the

benefits of introducing Restorative Justice practices as an early intervention tool for bullying, minor infractions and disruptive behavior in classrooms or the hallway (Hopkins, 2002; McCold, 2002; Morrison, 2002, 2005; Varnham, 2005; Wachtel, 2003).

Similar research has been reported in the United States. For instance, a Minnesota study (1998-2001) of four school districts demonstrated that after four years of school-based Restorative Measures, acts of physical aggression dropped from 773 to 153 in one elementary school; out-of-school suspension rates dropped 28 percent and 50 percent in two high schools; and in five elementary schools, between 50 to 70 percent of the teachers opted to use Circles for dealing with conflict and managing their classrooms instead of sending students to the office for retribution (Riestenberg, 2004). In a second evaluation conducted between 2001-2003, two inner-city elementary schools in Minnesota showed a 63 percent and a 45 percent reduction in suspensions, as a result of introducing Restorative Measures (Riestenberg, 2004). Schools in Peoria, Illinois, which introduced Peacemaking Circles as part of Restorative Practices program, experienced a 35 percent drop overall in detention referrals and a 43 percent drop in detention referrals of African-American students (Brown, 2008).

A study (1999-2001) conducted by Paul McCold (2002) at the CSF Buxmont Academy in Pennsylvania, a restorative school for at-risk youth involved in the judicial system, reported a 58 percent reduction in offending rates within six months following discharge for youth who completed their program. Of the 414 with matching intake and exit interviews, positive social values increased in 34 percent and self-esteem in 24 percent. McCold (2002) concludes that changes in the attitudes and behavior of youth were the result of participating in CSF's restorative school since the improvements rates

were positively related to the length of participation (p. 14). This and another study by Morrison (2002) are some of the earliest empirical investigations linking Restorative Practices to increased levels of self-esteem, social values and emotional literacy skills.

### **Whole-school paradigm and Restorative Justice Practices.**

Once schools began implementing the restorative philosophy, it became clear that more needed to be done to change the school climate before Restorative Conferencing or Circles, which were inherently reactive, could be fully effective (Morrison, Blood, & Thorsborne, 2005). Initially, most Restorative Practices introduced in schools fell within a continuum that ranged from informal restorative conversations in the classrooms and hallways to the more formal Restorative Conferencing for serious infractions. School leaders, however, saw the need to create a school environment that inhibited or prevented disruptive behavior from occurring in the first place. This meant a whole-school restorative approach that not only focused on restoring relationships if there has been harm, but also paying watchful attention to the psycho-social, emotional, physical and intellectual needs of the student-body and staff (Cameron & Thorsborne, 2001; Hopkins, 2004; Morrison, 2002; Morrison, Blood, & Thorsborne, 2005).

Many scholars outside the field of Restorative Justice and Restorative Practices—such as Comer (1980) with the *School Development Program*, Glasser (1998) with *Choice Theory*; Nelson, Lott, & Glenn (1997) with *Positive Discipline*; Senge et al. (2000); Sergiovanni (1994); and Solomon et al. (1992)—were already pioneers in promoting the value of positive peer relationships, emotional literacy skills, and building school community. The major contribution of Restorative Practices in schools is the acknowledgment of both the necessity to deal restoratively with wrongdoing, and to



address the social and emotional needs of the child. Simply stated, the overriding educational goal of a whole-school program is to build a just and fair school community that cares (Noddings, 2005; Sergiovanni, 1994).

### **Types of Circles in Restorative Justice and Restorative Practices.**

As mentioned above, Circles, which encourage power sharing and embody personal development principles, are key components of Restorative Practices or Restorative Justice programs and may vary considerably in purpose and size. The most common are *Classroom or Community-Building Circles* for developing rapport, teaching content, or addressing minor problems before they escalate; *Peacemaking Circles* for dealing with relational aggression and harm; *Problem-solving Circles* for resolving specific challenges and problems; *Circles of Support* for reintegrating juvenile offenders into school and the community; *Restorative or Family Group Conferencing*, for families to respond to more serious incidents or make decisions and plans for a young person's life; and *Talking Circles* for building relationships and personal growth development (Amstutz & Mullet, 2005; Boyes-Watson, 2008; Costello, Wachtel, & Wachtel, 2010; Holtham, 2009; Hopkins, 2004; Johnstone, 2002; McCold, 2006; Pranis, 2005; Pranis, Stuart, & Wedge, 2003; Riestenberg, 2012; Umbreit, 2003). The structure and process of each of these Circles, regardless of the context, are grounded in the philosophy of care.

### **The Care Paradigm: Restorative Justice, Restorative Practices and Schools**

The ethics of care grew out of the pioneering work of Carol Gilligan (1977; 1982) whose extensive empirical studies on women's moral reasoning revealed that traditional models of psychological stage development did not fit with the realities of women's lives. "The relational bias in women's thinking that has, in the past, been seen to compromise

their moral judgment and impede their development, now begins to emerge in a new developmental light” (Gilligan, 1977, p. 482).

Gilligan (1982) argued that stages of moral development should include both the justice and care perspectives, since the two approaches organize and respond to a moral problem differently. The morality of justice protects equality and freedom by focusing on fairness, individual rights and abstract universal principles. The morality of care views persons as relational and interdependent, and focuses on fostering social bonds, cooperation, trust, empathy, sensitivity, and shared responsiveness (Held, 2006; Lyons, 1990).

The practices of Restorative Justice espouse the values of both perspectives—trust building, openness, honesty, shared responsiveness and respect, as well as fairness and equality. Indeed, scholar and lawyer, Jennifer Llewellyn (2009), sees the two paradigms inseparable in Restorative Justice, identifying it as a relational theory of justice. Restorative Justice “takes connection and relationship over separation and independence as the basic starting point for thinking about justice and about the other ideas and conceptions that are foundational to our social and political life” (p. 141). In other words, the goal of Restorative Justice is to bring caring to the process of justice and justice to the process of caring.

This same relational view of caring can be found in the pioneering work of Nel Noddings (2003a, 2005) who has been a major force in the promotion of care and relationships as legitimate and fundamental goals in education. Her underlying premise is that children learn better when they are happy and happy people are rarely violent (Noddings, 2003b). Both Noddings (2005) and Comer (1988) maintain schools have

many teachers who care deeply about their students; yet, students' most common complaint about teachers is that "they don't care." Caring relations, asserts Noddings (2003a), do not exist if the recipient of our care believes that "nobody cares."

A telling study by the *Girl Scouts of America* (1989) of 5,000 girls and boys between fourth and twelfth grades, in public, private and parochial schools across the United States, reported that only one-third of the students felt their teachers and coaches "cared for them," and only 7% said they would turn to their teachers or coaches for advice (p. 5). A more recent investigation, *Teen Voice 2010*, which sampled 1,860 adolescents, 15 years of age, from around the United States, pointed to the value adolescents place on caring relationships with adults if the adults understand or "get them." To "get them," adults need to listen to them (80%); be honest with them (79%); show up when they say they will (73%); remember what the students tell them (71%); have fun with them (68%); hold them to higher standards than other kids (53%); and make them feel special by giving them privileges (39%) (Scales, Roehikepartain, & Benson, 2010, p. 7). The report concluded, "9 out of 10 American 15-year-olds do not have enough positive experiences and relationships upon which to build their lives" (Scales, Roehikepartain, and Benson, 2010, p. 9). These statistics may suggest that schools and communities could be doing a better job in providing the nurturance, support and opportunities that teens need to thrive (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 1990; Kunc, 1992; Payne, 2008).

### **School connectedness and the need to belong.**

The school context is a primary influence on students' social and ethical development as well as their academic growth (Blum, McNeeley, & Rinehart, 2002;

Brown & Evans, 2002; Solomon et al., 1992). The Search Institute (2011), a research-based organization studying what youth need for wholesome and healthy lives, has identified 40 Developmental Assets for Adolescents (ages 12-18). After family care and support, number three on the list is support from three or more nonparent adults; number four, caring neighbors, and number five, a caring and encouraging school climate.

When adolescents feel connected to and cared for in school, they report higher levels of emotional well being (Eccles et al., 1997; Resnick et al., 1997) and they are less likely to get involved in health-risk behavior, such as substance abuse, violence, and sexual activity (McNeely, Nonnemaker, & Blum, 2002) or in school misbehavior (Jenkins, 1997), or to drop out of school (Calabrese & Poe, 1990). Adolescents also fare better in school when they consistently experience positive emotional bonds with significant others (connectedness); have fair and consistent limits placed on their behavior (regulation); and are permitted to experience and value their own thoughts and emotions (psychological autonomy) (Barber & Olsen, 1997). For most students being involved in extracurricular activities also increases their levels of school connection (Brown & Evans, 2002).

After our physiological (food, warmth, shelter) and safety (stability, security, freedom from fear) needs have been met, Maslow's need hierarchy (1954) identifies "belonging" and "feeling cared for" as the next core human needs. Only *after* we are anchored in caring relationships and community can we develop self-worth and esteem, which then allows us to self-actualize and pursue our individual creative talents. In other words, *belonging* is requisite for the development of self-esteem and self-confidence, and ultimately, the wholesome growth of human potential (Kunc, 1992).

In fact, Maslow’s theory on belonging has been further substantiated by recent brain research, which is beginning to map what scientists are calling the “biochemistry of connection” (Brazelton et al., 2003). In a report to the nation from the Commission on Children at Risk, sponsored by YMCA of the USA, Dartmouth Medical School and the Institute for American Values, researchers claim that the “mechanisms by which we become and stay attached to others are biologically primed and increasingly discernible in the basic structure of the brain” (Brazelton et al., 2003, p. 16). Furthermore, “nurturing environments, or the lack of them, affect gene transcription and the development of brain circuitry” (p. 17). In other words, we are hardwired to connect and this is being proven by current research.

Yet, according to Kunc (1992), our society, which is reflected in our schools, has inverted the hierarchy of needs, even though one need is nested in the next. School administrators and politicians are creating policy that is based on achievement and mastery as primary sources for gaining self-worth, rather than on being cared for and belonging. This means that belonging, an unconditional need and right of all human beings, has been turned into something that must be earned through achievement, attractiveness, or physical prowess—something that only the “best” or a few of us can attain (Kunc, 1992). This elitist attitude often isolates students from each other and creates a competitive rather than cooperative school environment that is disruptive to the spirit of community.

### **Creating a caring school community.**

A caring school community is a “learning environment where teamwork is prevalent, diversity is incorporated, and individuals care about, trust, and respect each

other. Community members share a vision for the future of the school, a common sense of purpose, and a common set of values” (Wighting, Nisbet, & Spaulding, 2009, p.1). Such a bonded community, which shares ideas and ideals, is able to be transformed from a collection of individual “Is” into a collective of “we” whose members develop a tightly knit web of meaningful relationships that are caring and supportive (Sergiovanni, 1994, p. xvi). When students report a sense of community in schools, academic achievement is higher (Wighting, Nisbet, & Spaulding, 2009); class cutting, dropping out of school, drug use and delinquency are reduced (Battistich & Hom, 1997; Bryk & Driscoll, 1988; Calabrese & Poe, 1990; Royal & Rossi, 1996), and teachers model more restorative responses while, at the same time, report less “burn out” (Royal & Rossi, 1996).

Scholars from diverse backgrounds and different perspectives all argue that a primary reason for problematic schools is the loss of community and building a caring community should be at the heart of any school improvement effort (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 1990; Noddings, 2005; Sergiovanni, 1994; Solomon, Schaps, Watson, & Battistich, 1992). How do we build a caring or restorative community in schools?

Peter Block (2009) maintains that we need to shift our language with each other from “problems to possibilities; from fear and fault to gifts, generosity, and abundance; and from law and oversight to social fabric and chosen accountability” (p. 47). For Block (2009), a restorative community is one in which its members “use the language of healing and relatedness and belonging without embarrassment,” and choose accountability rather than a sense of entitlement in resolving interpersonal conflict (p. 48). The quality of relationships—based on the value of interdependence, a sense of belonging, and feelings of safety—determines the health of a community. Robert Putnam (2000), who

documents the steep decline of Americans' social interactions in his book *Bowling Alone*, calls this *social capital* and challenges us all to find innovative ways for civic engagement and active connection to build this capital.

For social capital to be built in schools, the community must meet some of the students' basic needs, such as belonging to a supportive social group; opportunities to build self-worth through mastery; making independent decisions; having control over parts of their lives; feeling appreciated and learning to be appreciative; and receiving clear guidance from adults (Solomon, Schaps, Watson, & Battistich, 1992, p. 43). Sergiovanni (1994) believes that schools have an obligation to not only meet these needs, but to also teach students about citizenship and how to be caring adults. The best way to teach these values is to actually live them in a total school community with teachers, parents, students, administrators and school boards all involved. If children are to become "thoughtful, self-directed, concerned about others and committed to learning," they need to be in a school that "allows the children to exercise and develop these qualities" (Solomon, Schaps, Watson, & Battistich, 1992, p. 41).

### **Girls: Gender Issues and the Relational Cultural Theory**

#### **Signs of trouble.**

Could our school communities be doing more for adolescent girls? We are seeing an increase in girls' levels of anxiety (Twenge, 2000) and prescriptions for antidepressant medications (Olson & Marcus, 2009), as well as depression lasting two or more weeks in one out of three girls (Twenge, 2006, p. 106). While more young men may die from suicide (National Institute of Mental Health, 2011), more adolescent girls are making suicidal attempts (Lewinsohn, Rhode, Seeley, & Baldwin, 2001) and engaging in

“deliberate self-harm” (Schimelpfening, 2011) than males. Sexualization of girls continues to be a “broad and increasing problem,” according to the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls (American Psychological Association, 2010), which reports that three of teen girls’ most common mental health problems—eating disorders, low self-esteem and depression or depressed mood—are linked to the explicit and implicit sexual messages communicated through the media and culture (Durkin & Paxton, 2002; Harrison, 2000; Thomsen, Weber, & Brown, 2002). One out of four teenage American girls, according to another study conducted by the Centers for Disease Control (2008), has been identified with a sexually transmitted disease, with the most common being a virus that causes cervical cancer, and the second most common, causing infertility.

#### **Girls in the juvenile justice system.**

Over the last 20 years, more girls are being arrested and placed in detention facilities, many of which are entering the system with some of the mental and health problems mentioned above (Cooney, Small, & O’Connor, 2008; Veysey, 2003). For instance, between 1990-1999, arrest rates for girls rose 50%, while arrest rates for boys rose only 4% (Harms, 2003). In 2004 with the continued rise of girls’ delinquency, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention of the U.S. Department of Justice commissioned a Girls Study Group to determine “whether these trends reflect an actual increase in girls’ delinquency or changes in societal responses to girls’ behavior” (Zahn et al., 2008). Their findings suggest that girls continue to engage in less crime than boys for nearly every offense, especially violent crimes, but the mandatory arrest policies and other changes in the juvenile justice system have had a significant impact on higher arrest rates for girls (Slowikowski, 2010, p. 2). The majority of female juvenile arrests are for



more minor offenses—such as theft, alcohol or drug abuse, and simple assault—or for prostitution and runaways (Sherman, 2005, p. 11). Also more and more girls are being pulled into the juvenile justice system as punishments for school-based fights and family conflicts have increased (Steffensmeier et al., 2005).

Girls may not be committing as many violent crimes as males, but authors, Artz (1998) and Prothrow-Stith and Spivak (2005), warn that girls are exhibiting more violent and mean behavior in resolving their interpersonal conflicts. Relational aggression among girls is both overt through physical fighting and covert through spreading rumors, gossiping and excluding (Hossfeld, 2008). Lyn Mikel Brown (2003) argues that the root of girls' anger is their lack of empowerment and voice in society. Others claim that girls may be becoming more violent as a means to prevent or stop attacks on themselves (Leitz, 2003) or to stop abuse by running away from home (Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 1998; Dohrn, 2004). A California study of incarcerated girls reported that 92% of the girls said they had experienced, at some point in their life, emotional, physical and/or sexual abuse (Acoca & Dedel, 1998). Koroki and Chesney-Lind (1985) concluded that poverty, physical and sexual abuse, severe family problems and disorganized, unsafe communities account for the primary reasons girls have difficulty in school and eventually move into the juvenile justice system.

Chesney-Lind (2004) suggests that when confronting girls' anger and subsequent violent responses, we need to provide gender-specific prevention and intervention programs in schools “that give girls ways to be angry appropriately while also empowering them” before they get in trouble with the law (p.1). Once in the juvenile justice system, girls' delinquency studies are calling for more gender-responsive, holistic

and restorative services that are based on the realities of girls' lives rather than on policies and procedures developed for males (Bloom & Covington, 2001; Chesney-Lind, 1997; Chesney-Lind & Shelton, 1998). The most effective programs for girls have been centered on relationships, and female growth and development (Covington, 2007), which is supported by Rodriguez (2007) who reported that girls had the lowest recidivism rates after being introduced to the Restorative Justice process in detention. While literature on feminist engagement with Restorative Justice in the juvenile justice system is still recent and evolving (Daly, 2008; Daly & Stubbs, 2006; Gaarder & Presser, 2006; Pepi, 1998; Verrecchia, 2009), some scholars are turning to the Relational Cultural Theory to explain female growth and development and explore ways to bring this theory into the juvenile justice system to change current policies (Covington, 2007; Girls Circle Association, 2011; Hossfeld, 2008).

### **Relational Cultural Theory.**

The Relational Cultural Theory is rooted in the work of Jean Baker Miller (1976), who began questioning the traditional developmental theories of differentiation and autonomous self as evidence of emotional maturity and psychological health. At about the same time Carol Gilligan (1982) was collecting empirical data on how women and men differ in their moral decision-making process, Miller and her colleagues (Jordan et al., 1991) were exploring gender differences in relationships and women's psychological experiences. They contended that a woman's primary motivation is to build connections and be in relationship with others, rather than to separate. For Miller and her core research group (Jordan et al., 1991), *connection*, which is a basic human need, is particularly strong in women—that is, a woman develops a sense of self and self-worth

when her “actions arise out of, and lead back into, connections with others” (Covington, 2007, p. 138). Thus, this model of human development, which places connection at the center of growth, posits that we evolve in relationship throughout our lives and that “increasing relationship differentiation—rather than separation from sustaining relationships—is the route of development” (Jordan, 2010, p. 3).

Growth-fostering relationships are created through mutual empathy and mutual empowerment (Jordan et al., 1991) and are characterized by “five good things”—a sense of zest; empowerment to act or be productive; better understanding of self and others; a sense of worth; and increased desire for connection with others (Miller & Stiver, 1997). The ideal movement of a relationship, says Jordan (2010), is toward greater authenticity, mutual empathy and mutual empowerment. Ultimately, in a growth-fostering relationship, it is about feeling respected, heard and understood—all fundamental tenets of Restorative Justice. Relational Cultural Theory sees the loss, distortion or absence of mutually empathic or empowering relationships to be a source of distress or psychological problems and at the root of violence (Miller & Stiver, 1997). The question is whether we can learn how to be empathic and to listen attentively in order to develop healthy, growth-fostering relationships and whether such skills can be taught and nurtured in schools.

### **Emotional Literacy: Developing Skills in Schools**

Scholars recommending a whole school approach with the practices and principles of Restorative Justice believe that these skills can be learned and advocate for the introduction of emotional literacy programs to help improve social relationships and the overall school culture (Hopkins, 2004; Monk, 2010; Morrison, 2002, 2005; Morrison,

Blood, & Thorsborne, 2005). The Restorative Justice guides for schools issued by the State of Illinois (Ashley & Burke, 2009) and the Alameda County Health Care Services Agency (Kidde & Alfred, 2011) in the San Francisco Bay area are just two recent examples of comprehensive and holistic programs acknowledging the fundamental value of emotional literacy skills—such as empathy, listening, critical thinking and self-control—for reducing violence and conflict and building social capital in our schools.

Daniel Goleman (1995), who helped popularize the concept of these sets of skills as *emotional intelligence*, argues that children need to be taught how to be aware of their emotions so they can develop into their fullest potential, build healthy, growth-fostering relationships and prevent the escalation of interpersonal conflict. From his perspective, the skill at which we are able to handle our emotional life determines how well we thrive in life. Goleman and his colleagues define an emotionally intelligent person as one who “demonstrates the competencies that constitute self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and social skills at appropriate times and ways in sufficient frequency to be effective in the situation” (Boyatzis, Goleman, & Rhee, 2000, p. 344).

In closing, evidence-based research of programs that teach social and emotional proficiencies confirm positive changes in youth development, such as self-control, interpersonal skills and academic achievement; significant improvement in problem behavior, such as truancy, drug and alcohol abuse and violence; higher motivation and morale of the students and staff; and an overall improved school climate (Catalano et al., 2002; Durlak & Wells, 1997; Wells, Barlow, & Stewart-Brown, 2003). A primary tenet of the practice of Restorative Justice is the regulation of our social relationships (Morrison, 2002), so for many it makes sense to create an emotionally literate school

where youth learn how to better interact with each other and practice being “a different kind of smart” (Bocchino, 1999; Steiner, 1997; Weare, 2004).

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 describe, through the students’ own voices, how being in the Talking Circles taught them to be a “different kind of smart,” and reflect the potential Circles have for helping teens develop authentic relationships and become more self-aware. Before hearing their voices, however, Chapter 2 presents the methodology I used for collecting the data, and Chapter 3 introduces 9 of the 12 Circles, written from my perspective as both the “insider” and “outsider.”

## CHAPTER 2 DESCRIBING RESEARCH METHODS, SITE AND PARTICIPANTS

In this chapter, I briefly provide a rationale for selecting the interpretive paradigm to view my data, and for choosing ethnography as my research design. I then describe the research site and its climate; the process of “getting into” the research field and selecting the participants; the organizational structure of the Circle; and the qualitative research tools I used for collecting and interpreting data. In closing, I outline the procedures I employed for strengthening the rigor of the research project.

Initially, when I embarked upon this research journey, I had several broad interests in mind—whether out-of-classroom Circles with five to six adolescent girls could be a safe and trusting space for teens to explore the depths of interpersonal relationships and experience social emotional learning, and whether Talking Circles, as part of a whole-school Restorative Justice or Restorative Practices program, might serve as an additional support structure for building social capital in the school. As the journey progressed through the literature review, I narrowed these broad interests to the following two research questions:

RQ1: Would the girls be able to co-create a safe Circle space that encouraged *growth-fostering relationships*, which focus on greater authenticity, mutual empathy and mutual empowerment?

RQ2: Would the Circle environment be conducive for developing *emotional literacy skills* and encouraging *self-efficacy*?

One purpose for answering these questions was to determine whether small, out-of-classroom Talking Circles might be recommended for inclusion in a whole-school Restorative Practices program.

### **The Interpretive Paradigm and Ethnography**

Turning now to why I chose to use the interpretive paradigm for this research. Our reality, from an *interpretive perspective*, is shared, socially constructed and fluid. An interpretive researcher focuses on individuals and how they draw conclusions about their world through the *relationships* they share in this fluid reality. Since my research was about relationships in the Circle—a socially constructed, participatory, collaborative space with ongoing interpersonal dynamics and meaning-making practices—I relied on a holistic interpretive framework for understanding the girls’ rich, complex systems of interchange (Griffin, 2000). Intuitive and nonhierarchical by nature, the Talking Circles constantly ebbed and flowed with a high degree of information sharing and interpersonal openness (Yorks, Neuman, Kowalski, & Kowalski, 2007). The themes and patterns of meaning, social behavior and emotional development that emerged out of the Circle from the information sharing and interpersonal openness eventually became the structural foundation upon which this dissertation was built.

What research design would allow for the exploration of the Talking Circle as a cultural phenomenon and for recording the girls’ concurrent social dialogue and interactions (Le Compute & Schensul, 1999)? Since my research questions could only be answered by observing and comprehending how teens process, make sense of and are affected by the Circle experience, I needed a qualitative design that supported multiple student perspectives and systems of meaning, as well as one that encouraged thick,

textured descriptions and interpretations of the Circle process and social practices (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Therefore, *ethnography* became the methodology of choice. Situated in the “naturalistic setting” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and immersed in the teens’ day-to-day school lives, both within and outside the different culture-sharing Circles, I was able to observe their behavior, language and social interactions (Creswell, 2007; LeCompte & Schensul, 1999).

The approach I used to analyze the data was a modified version of the cyclical inductive and deductive process, advocated by both Glaser and Strauss (1967) in “grounded theory” and by Spradley (1979; 1980) in his “domain and structural analysis.” This ethnography is based on *participant observations* with thick, textured descriptions of the Circle meetings and the field; one-on-one semi-structured *interviews* with students to explore dimensions of their individual experiences in the Circle and with selected gatekeepers to ascertain their perspectives of the overall Circle effect; and *archival documents*, such as emails and text messages from students. Henceforth, in the dissertation, notes from the Circle meetings are identified with CN (Appendix A); notes from the field, FN (Appendix B); and interview quotes, IN (Appendix C). Questions from the semi-structured interviews are listed in Appendix D.

### **Research Site: A Multicultural Urban High School**

The fieldwork took place in a multi-ethnic urban high school situated in a transient and impoverished immigrant community of 22,000 people tightly packed within 2.1 square miles. Twenty-six spoken languages are one of its drawing cards. Originally settled by Europeans in the early 1900s, this community of diverse inhabitants, embedded in a large Midwestern metropolis, now houses, in addition to its European natives, first



and second-generation immigrants from the Middle East, Southeast Europe and South Asia. Another 15% African Americans are added to this multi-ethnic mix.

Facing a serious economic crisis due to local plant shut downs and the national economic recession, 51.0 % of this community's children (ages 5 to 17) are living in poverty according to 2008 statewide statistics (U.S. Census Bureau). Since 2010, the city has been dealing with a \$5 million deficit and the growing concern of state receivership and possible bankruptcy. A drive down the main streets reveals empty storefronts, reduced public services, poorly kept parks and homes selling for \$10,000 to \$15,000.

Some of this community stress is reflected in the public schools. During spring, 2009, in an effort to address the alarming rise of suspensions and expulsions and the low academic achievement rates in the district, the school board introduced a Restorative Practices program—inspired by the Restorative Justice movement sweeping across the United States—to each of their three elementary schools and one middle school. The new Restorative Practices program was financed with Title I funds.<sup>4</sup> The high school did not receive Title I funding and, thus, was unable to support a Restorative Practices program even though it reported the highest out-of-school suspension and expulsion rates in the district. For instance, in the 2009-2010 academic year alone, out of a total of 933 students enrolled, there were 19 expulsions and 1, 306 out-of-school suspensions (Superintendent's Office, personal communication, June 15, 2011).

Morale was low in the high school with a four-year graduation rate of around 64% (Superintendent's Office, personal communication, November 28, 2011). At one school

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<sup>4</sup> Title I, of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, provides financial assistance to schools with high percentages of children from low-income families.

district meeting in the winter of 2009,<sup>5</sup> I listened to teachers passionately report on students' lack of academic ability and accountability, apathy, incivility, and poor communication and social skills. By spring 2010, there was talk of the high school going into receivership as it was close to joining the ranks of other failing public schools across the nation. During my first visit to the high school, my journal entry vividly reflected the school's daily chaos:

As I walked through the front door and a tired-looking metal detector at around 1:00 PM, I am immediately greeted by enormous confusion, chaos and a lot of angry words that begin with F..... I think I hear "lock-down" and imagine that I have entered a "jail break." One kind, grey-haired lady, looking distraught and serious, directs me to the office on the right. When I enter, it is packed with really upset kids! A robust African-American female security officer is yelling at the kids crowded in the office to "get out;" two Arab boys yell back and begin to imitate her in a demeaning way. One girl aggressively slams her book on the office countertop, demanding to call her mother. I immediately sit down on the only office bench, which feels like an uncomfortable church pew, next to maybe 10 other agitated students, and feel totally, absolutely stunned by this mayhem. Is this the high school I am thinking about working in?  
(FN 1, December 7, 2009)

The high school is housed in a yellow brick building that was designed and built for middle school children in 1930 with minimal upgrades since then. Situated in the center of the community, it is surrounded on three sides by a narrow two-lane street and small two floor family homes or apartments built four to five feet apart. On the south side, a narrow two-row parking lot separates the high school from the public Community Center, which the high school rents for social activities since it does not have an appropriate gym or auditorium. Every year the interior of the school gets a face-lift with a fresh coat of paint and polish on the floors.

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<sup>5</sup> An introductory talk on Restorative Practices provided for the district's teachers and staff, December 1, 2009.

### **Gaining entry.**

By January 2010, seeing both the need and the possibility of introducing some form of Restorative Practices to the high school, I contacted the district's Curriculum Director who spearheaded the implementation of Restorative Practices in the four public schools mentioned above. During our initial meeting, I offered to organize out-of-class Circles for groups of five to six girls, as a small part of a grassroots "unofficial and voluntary" Restorative Practices program in the high school. The outcome of these Circles, I explained, would be the crux of my dissertation project. Very aware of the need for "fair return" (Spradley, 1980) when requesting access to a research setting, I pointed out the potential "worth" of the study (Berg, 2001) for the girls individually, as well as for the school collectively, and presented credentials of my prior work in court and community mediation and in the field of Restorative Justice.

Before this pivotal meeting with the Curriculum Director, I had spent four months (September-December 2009) preparing for entry into the research setting, conscious of the "getting in" problem described by Berg (2001) and Lincoln and Guba (1985). Using what Schatzman and Strauss (1973) call a "casing and approaching" strategy, I respectfully built trustworthy relationships with potential gatekeepers (Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999) and garnered background information on the diverse community at large. This included shadowing the work of a Restorative Practice Coordinator<sup>6</sup> in one elementary school for three months; having informal conversations with community members and public school teachers to get a grasp of the ethnic diversity

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<sup>6</sup> Each of the four schools were assigned a Restorative Practices Coordinator who handles discipline issues and instructs other teachers how to use Restorative Practices in their classrooms.

and local issues; attending an international Restorative Practices conference with the district's Restorative Practices Coordinators and Curriculum Director; and participating in various school and community activities throughout the district.

### **Gatekeepers.**

This preparatory time was important. The Curriculum Director by then felt comfortable with me, readily agreed to my proposal, and immediately introduced me to the vice-principal and head social worker at the high school. During the two years of research, they became two of my three primary *gatekeepers* (Berg, 2001; Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999) within the high school. The vice-principal provided me with a room for the Circles, Internet access and an official introduction to the teachers. The social worker selected the initial groups of female students for the Circles and remained a trusting confidant throughout the research project. At the time I entered the research field one month later, in February 2010, the high school was going through an administrative upheaval with calls for the principal to resign. By September 2010 a new principal, who became an ardent supporter of the Talking Circles, was in place and became my third primary gatekeeper for this project.

### **School climate.**

When I first arrived in February 2010, tension and disorder were palpable in the high school. Some teachers and staff were weary, stressed and irritable, and complained of not being supported by the administration. Some students not-so-discretely smoked cigarettes and marijuana in the hallways or bathrooms; listened to music or talked on cell phones; walked the hallways during class time; yelled back and forth or wrestled in the hallways; skipped classes and walked out of the building; had food fights during lunch

time; and disrespected both teachers and peers (FN 9, February 23, 2010; FN 10, March 3, 2010).

The physical fights both during and after school, that sometimes required police intervention, were reportedly racially motivated. The vice-principal, however, adamantly disputed this rumor saying,

It's not about racial issues. What it is, is if I'm Arab, most of my friends tend to be Arab and if there's a problem...and this kid is from the Balkans over here... a lot of his friends are from the Balkans. It's classified as a racial fight because it's Arabs against them. But where in essence it's me and my friends and you and your friends. (VP2, IN37, 2011, p. 3)

Generally, the conflicts, he said, were over "typical high school issues" that centered on gaining power and status and "where we had a fight... it was black on black; Arab on Arab; or South Asian on South Asian" (VP2, IN37, 2011, p. 3).

Fighting among the girls, said the vice-principal, began to increase when there was influx of girls from closed public schools in the surrounding area who had to mix "with the girls that are basically residents here in town and culturally there is a difference. I mean you can see the difference. I think that both sides kind of take the stand that I'm not going to be pushed around by somebody from the outside" (VP2, IN37, 2011, p. 1). Their conflicts centered around two fundamental issues: an attack or perceived attack on their self-image and/or power struggles over a boy (VP2, IN37, 2011, p. 4).

The principal, whose contract was terminated in June 2010, responded to the indiscipline with out-of-school suspension or expulsion, which did not alter the students' behavior. Gradual positive changes began in September 2010 with the hiring of a new principal. This included the enforcement of the already existing dress code; better training of the security staff and improved hall monitoring; an in-school suspension

program; staff development support and the gradual introduction of Restorative Practices, such as a few classroom community-building Circles. It was against this backdrop that the Circles described in this dissertation took form between February 2010 and December 2011—a time when the high school was undergoing profound change, challenges and upheaval.

### **Selection of Participants: Adolescent Girls**

Participants for the Circles were recruited in *five different ways*. Initially, when I gained entry to the setting, I relied on the social worker who, together with the gym teacher, selected several groups of girls out of the gym classes. Viewing these Circles as an opportunity and a privilege, the gym teacher chose those she called the “good girls” who could be excused from gym class for the weekly Circle and “who rarely get attention at school because they never get into trouble.” I had no input in the selection of participants for the first three Circles.

Eight of the students from these three groups, which disbanded at the end of the first term (June, 2010) due to students graduating or moving out of the district, opted to create or join other Circles the second year (2010-2011). This self-generated initiative was a second way the groups were formed.

As I became more familiar with the social situation and felt less of a stranger, I sought a different recruiting technique by either sitting in the office and talking with some of the girls being disciplined for various school infractions, or casually striking up conversations in the hall. Once gaining their trust, I explained my purpose for being in the school as a volunteer and described the Circles I was organizing. If they expressed interest, I suggested they compile a list of five or six students with whom they would like

to be in the Circle. Two groups were organized in this way and became the third recruiting strategy. I chose this direct approach simply as a way to create more Circles.

A teacher and the new principal proved to be a fourth recruiting source. They were each concerned about the well being of two different students and thought a Circle might provide a supportive environment for them to work through some of their difficulties. After a confidential meeting with each student, in which I explained the Circle process and my research project, they both readily provided me with their list of participants and another two groups were created.

The fifth recruiting strategy relied on the ongoing relationship I maintained with the Restorative Practice Coordinator in the middle school. At the onset of the school year in September 2010, she recommended two separate groups of incoming freshmen students who were not necessarily friends, but who had participated in Restorative Practices' activities she had organized in the middle school. I met with each group separately and they both wanted to be part of a weekly Circle.

Throughout the research, I followed all University policies and procedures for ethical treatment of research participants, as required by Wayne State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) (See Appendix E for a copy of their original approval to conduct this research). When each group met the first time, I explained that I would be conducting research on the Circle process and provided them with an IRB approved Teen Assent form, which we reviewed together. I also provided them with an IRB approved opt-out Parental Permission and Information Sheet, which they gave to their parents. If the parents or the student did not contact me within two weeks opposing their enrollment in my study, we began the Circles.

Throughout the nearly two years of research (February 2010-December 2011), 60 girls, ranging in age from 14 to 18, participated in 12 different Circles that met between 15 to 33 times each. Eleven of the girls joined a second Circle after their first one disbanded. Overall, three of the Circles had seven students each; five of the Circles had six students; and four of the Circles had five students.

During the second year's Circles, one Circle lost a member when she dropped out of school toward the end of the year, and another Circle lost two members when their families moved out of the district. For the most part, however, the Circles remained stable in both participation and attendance and no one left a Circle for reasons other than those mentioned above. Five of the Circles that began in the academic year 2010-2011 continued on into the academic year 2011-2012.

### **Setting up the Talking Circles**

#### **Circle Site.**

There are two fundamental requirements for a good Circle site: *quietness and privacy*. When I arrived in the middle of the academic year in February 2010, all of the rooms that could provide privacy and quietness were occupied with other academic programs or classes. This high school because of its age and size is severely limited in space and comfort. I was grateful when the vice-principal offered an unused Math classroom turned storage room on the second floor, packed with long rectangular-shaped computer desks, a few unstable plastic chairs, hardwood floors that needed cleaning, and floor-to-ceiling windows without blinds. We made it work and the first four Circles met there on a weekly basis until mid-June, 2010.



The Circle site changed at the beginning of the new academic year in September 2010 when the coveted space, known as the Apartment, was offered by the vice-principal as the “unofficial” Restorative Practices room. The small living room with a beautiful, green-tiled fireplace—the only space available in the Apartment since the other rooms now store books, files and other school bric-a-brac—met both requirements for privacy and silence, and an added bonus of semi-comfort. There is nondescript neutral red carpeting on the floor, tall windows with broken but functional shades, and comfortable black plastic and green cloth-covered chairs. On the three days a week that I was there, the Apartment was not only a place for holding Circles, but also a quiet and safe environment where students often dropped in for casual chatting or private conversations with me. The only drawback was a rare visit from a mouse that sent several students scurrying up on chairs or racing out of the room in hysterics. The maintenance team always came to the rescue.

### **Organizational structure.**

The Circle, as a non-hierarchical form of communication and openness, has been around since time immemorial. Those practiced today in schools, communities and the judicial systems across the United States and Canada are deeply rooted in the traditional councils held by the indigenous people. They range in purpose and are known by many different names including Restorative Circles, Healing Circles, Peacemaking Circles, Community-building Circles, Friendship Circles, Circles of Trust, Circles of Power, Talking Circles, Sentencing Circles, or Restorative Conferencing Circles.

By placing the chairs in a circular format around an open, unobstructed center, there is neither a beginning nor an end, which represents a profound archetype for

wholeness, interconnection, and interdependence. The center, which draws participants inward and together, holds any objects meaningful to the group. In our Circles, we had a candle, the values' plates and ribbons described below, and small dolls<sup>7</sup> I had made out of socks.

The Circle is a self-regulating, engaging process that encourages deep respectful listening and speaking from the heart. Since the participants must feel safe and experience a sense of belonging based on trust in order for the Circle to function in its richest capacity, it is essential they all agree to the basic Guidelines<sup>8</sup> and any additional ones they want to add. The Circle Keeper then introduces the “talking piece” (a symbolic object) that is passed around the Circle to regulate communication. When holding the talking piece, each person has the opportunity to speak without being interrupted or an option to pass if she so chooses. The primary role of the Circle Keeper is to maintain the integrity of the Circle, which is grounded in respectful listening and speaking, and appropriate use of the talking piece.

The 12 Circles I organized in the high school evolved into a four-part structural framework that included a) “checking in,” b) “burning issues,” c) “topic of the day,” and d) a “closing.” I will briefly review the four sections since they provide the backbone of the Circle process we used in the high school.

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<sup>7</sup> I included the sock dolls for those girls who needed something to occupy their hands because of nervous tension, or to comfort them during the Circle meeting. The girls liked them so much that I taught groups of them how to make their own dolls in 3-hour blocks of time on school half-days.

<sup>8</sup> The Guidelines include: speaking from the heart with honesty and compassion; listening and speaking respectfully; using the talking piece; and following the code of confidentiality, which is, “What is said in the Circle, stays in the Circle.”

During the “checking-in,” the talking piece (a pliable world-globe ball) is passed from teen to teen, who shares how she is feeling or describes something relevant (or not) about the week. This checking-in period is important because it helps students transition from their busy lives outside, and invites them into the quiet and safe space of the Circle. It is a reminder that they can be authentic in expressing their deepest emotions and be open to the needs and feelings of others by listening attentively and respectfully.

In the next round, students bring up, if they choose, their “burning issues” or the specific problems they currently face, such as family concerns, relational issues or academic troubles. In some Circles, depending upon the day, the entire hour may be spent on “burning issues.” At other times, “checking-in” and “burning issues” are completed quickly.

This is followed by the “topic of the day” which is a discussion based on reflective questions I prepare in advance related to topics suggested by the students. Subjects vary from academic careers, school issues and relationships, to boys, self-esteem, teen pregnancy and anger management. The questions are formulated in such a way to encourage thought-provoking dialogue and reflective inquiry for the purposes of developing their emotional literacy and critical thinking skills.

The Circles “closed” with an inspirational quote or poem which I read as a way of formally acknowledging the closure of the collaborative space that protects the heartfelt truths revealed, and to help them transition back into the chaotic hallway and classroom. During the second year of Circles, as an alternative to a reading, I also introduced a candle and had them make their wish for the week before blowing it out as a group at the

end of the Circle. There were times, however, when discussions were so intense that the academic school bell “closed” our Circle.

### **Circle ceremonies.**

Once it is clear that a group has bonded, which is usually by the second or third Circle, and they have agreed to the Circle’s guidelines, I introduce them to two formal rituals – The Ribbon Tying Ceremony and the Values Plate Ceremony. Arnold van Gennep, the noted anthropologist and sociologist, claimed in his classic study of cultural ceremonies, *The Rites of Passage*, that the essential purpose of a ceremony is to “enable the individual to pass from one defined position to another which is equally well defined” (Vizedom & Caffee, 1960, p. 3). These two rituals thus draw a boundary between the social space of their school activities with defined roles and responsibilities, and the sacred space of the Circle where they can authentically connect to others through deep listening and caring.

In the *Ribbon Tying Ceremony*, after each student selects a colorful ribbon, we hold the ribbons on our lap while each person talks about an individual in their life who has influenced them to be the good person they are today. While that person is speaking, she ties her ribbon to the ribbon of the person sitting on her left. After each person has spoken, we all stand up, holding the completed circle of ribbons, and gently place it on the floor cloth in the center of the Circle. I explain that this ribbon symbolizes each person’s commitment to each other, to the values and purpose of the Circle, and to the code of confidentiality to which they have all agreed to respect.

For the *Values Plate Ceremony*, each girl is given a small white paper plate and colored felt-tipped pens, and asked to write on the plate the value(s) she wishes to bring

to the Circle. Each person talks about the importance of her value(s) and places the plate on the floor cloth in front of her. Values are particularly important to identify in the beginning of the Circle because we show how we strive to *be* in the Circle even during times of stress or conflict. Each time a Circle meets, I place that particular Circle's ribbons and plates in the center as a reminder of the commitments we have made to each other and to the Circle process itself.

### **Challenges.**

Researchers who enter an unfamiliar cultural group face an array of challenges, especially during the integration phase, which have been vividly described by ethnographic scholars such as Berg (2001), Creswell (2007), Druckman (2005), Lincoln and Guba (1985), and Schensul, Schensul and LeCompte (1999). In hindsight, my experience of "getting into" the field and establishing the first three Circles was relatively easy due in part to pre-field preparations. Organizing the remaining nine Circles, however, proved to be both challenging and at times, frustrating. The primary obstacles were being an "outsider" in an unfamiliar environment and not knowing the culture, and the resistance of a few teachers.

Even though I followed Schatzman and Strauss's (1973) "casing and approaching" technique as much as possible before entering the field, once in the setting as an "invited guest," there was much I did not understand about the already established educational system. This included academic scheduling and routines, relational dynamics, power structures, the realities of factionalism, and patterns of behavior among both the staff and students.

For instance, I was clearly unaware of the effect the administrative upheaval was having on interpersonal relationships. Some of the students were “acting out” (smoking, cursing, disorderly conduct) in the classrooms, hallways and lunchroom and it was difficult to comprehend when, where and how rules were being enforced. Many of the teachers barely broke a smile and appeared worn out. Wishing to maintain a “nonthreatening demeanor” (Lofland, Snow, Anderson, & Lofland, 2006), I hesitated asking too many questions and tried to navigate among the stressed relationships and finding ways to start the Circles without intruding on people’s time and space. Ultimately, I took on the humorous role of a “socially acceptable incompetent,” (Lofland, Snow, Anderson, & Lofland, 2006, p. 69), and proceeded slowly and inconspicuously as much as possible. LeCompte and Schensul (1999) are correct when they claim an ethnographic researcher does not have much control over what happens in the field.

A second challenge was a few key teachers subtly resisting the formation of the Circles. I heard from several teachers that Restorative Practices (and the Circles) was “just another program that comes and goes so why invest our time or interest in it.” Evidently, over the years, a variety of school “improvement” programs had been introduced, only to slowly fade away due to lack of funding or loss of interest. Several teachers showed their resistance by sending me last minute emails announcing that a particular student would not be allowed to come to that day’s Circle, or to join if it was just getting organized. In rare cases, the student was simply not allowed to leave class for the Circle meeting and I would only find out about it later. Once a Circle is established, the absence of just one student tends to interrupt the group dynamics. Furthermore, the students who were not allowed to come were often the ones having the most difficulty in

school, both academically and behaviorally, and whom I particularly wanted to monitor to understand the effect the Circle might be having on them, if any.

Certainly, I needed to address this resistance carefully, patiently and respectfully. After all, I was once a teacher and wondered whether I might have also resisted having my students leave class for something as “nebulous” as a Circle. I chose, however, not to go to my gatekeepers for assistance, but instead to approach the challenge from two different angles. First, I got to know the so-called “resisters,” and made considerable effort to build rapport (Berg, 2001; Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999) by stopping to say hello during breaks in their classroom teaching; listening to some of their frustrations about the behavior of some of the Circle students; and sending an email reminder to all teachers before each Circle meeting and an email after to confirm their student’s presence in the Circle.

Second, I made it clear that the students were responsible for completing their homework and would only be absent from their class once a month. I had created a complex rotating schedule in which the Circles could meet once a week, but a student would miss the same class only once a month. The teachers received this schedule each month so they knew in advance when their students were scheduled to miss the class. Even though I have evidence that most teachers did not look at the schedule once placed in their mailboxes, I considered it important to consistently show that the Circles were well organized, serious and part of a long-term vision for introducing Restorative Practices to the school. This concentrated effort paid off because by the third semester of Circles, students never missed a Circle due to a teacher’s resistance unless they were having an exam.

A primary hurdle to overcome with some of the teachers was their belief that the Circles were a reward for students with “bad” classroom behavior. Without breaking the students’ confidentiality, I pointed out that we were working on respectful listening, taking responsibility and caring in the Circle, which had a chance of being transferred to the classroom if we remained patient. In essence I was seeking their support for a long-term vision rather than short-term results.

### **Data Collection Techniques**

As I began to envision how this qualitative research project would “unfold, cascade, roll, and emerge” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 210), I settled on three primary sources for collecting data – *participant observations* of the Circle meetings and the field in which the Circles took place; *one-on-one, semi-structured interviews* of participants in the Circles, a few teachers and gatekeepers (Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999); and *archival documents*, such as emails and text messages from students.

#### **Participant observations.**

During the three-month planning period, it became clear that once in the field, I would assume the *participant-as-observer* role (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). In the capacity of *participant-as-observer* during the nearly two years of research, I was fully involved with the informants, serving as the Circle keeper during 257 hours of Circles with 12 different groups of adolescent girls, each meeting between 15 to 33 times. I gained additional insight into the participants and their lives outside the Circle when many of them began communicating with me through email or text messaging, or when I attended after school or evening functions in which they were involved. During the three days (Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays) a week I spent in school between 8 AM to 3 PM,



there were “pop-in” visits for brief conversations between classes, emergency interventions to resolve interpersonal crises, and individual requests for conversations about deeper personal concerns.

Morrison (1993) argues that by being “immersed in a particular context over time, not only will the salient features of the situation emerge and present themselves, but a more holistic view will be gathered of the interrelationships of factors” (as cited in Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007, p. 405). This immersion experience—the traditional definition of participant observation (Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999)—provided an immense depth to my research as well as to my own personal growth as a human being.

#### **Field notes.**

Immersion in the field encourages “thick description” which is defined as carefully and accurately *describing* and *interpreting* social actions that occur within the culture being studied (Ponterotto, 2006). The writing should be so graphic and richly detailed that the readers feel they are experiencing or could experience the events being described (Denzin, 1989).

To record the social interactions of the participants during the Circle process itself, I kept a clipboard in my lap and tried to make inconspicuous fragmentary jottings of key concepts or words. These condensed notes (Spradley, 1980) were expanded into more detailed, coherent accounts on my laptop immediately following or a few hours after the Circle meeting. While re-typing the notes, I added my own interpretations of participant behavior or actions on the sidebar. This parallel recording and interpreting follows the recommendation of Norman Denzin (1989) who claims that “thick description” first

attempts to “rescue the meanings, actions and feelings” of an interaction experience and then it interprets the interaction by “capturing the meanings persons bring to their experiences” (p. 159). The field notes were catalogued and stored on an ID protected back-up computer system, and printed, catalogued and stored safely in a privately locked office.

### **Memo-writing.**

Following the grounded theory model, I began memo writing mid-way through the collection process as a means for comparing and exploring ideas, and for providing theoretical direction to the research (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The memos provided a vehicle for bringing subtle observations and questions to the surface of awareness and helped crystallize some of the emergent categories and themes that were developing. While the purpose of memos is to record ideas as quickly as possible, Charmaz (2006) also stresses that memo writing strengthens one’s natural voice when written in an unedited and spontaneous format. These memos proved to be a living response to the moment and supported my recorded data with a significant wealth of insights that might have been forgotten.

### **Semi-structured and focused group interviews.**

Between June 2010 and June 2011, I completed four focus group student interviews; 28 semi-structured single student interviews; three semi-structured paired interviews with six students; and seven semi-structured single interviews with the new principal, vice-principal (two times), two teachers and two staff members. These exploratory interviews (Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999) expanded my understanding of the rich layer of meaning the students were giving to the Circle

experience, as well as to how the Circles were being accepted and supported by the administration. I prepared questions in advance, but the interviews generally remained flexible and open-ended to capture their serendipitous responses (See Appendix D for interview questions for students).

Schensul, Schensul and LeCompte (1999) argue that it is not necessary to interview many key informants to glean a large amount of information. I discovered, however, that even though there were many commonalities in the 31 student interviews, even reaching a saturation point, each student contributed something unique from her own perspective, which I did not want to miss. I also needed to collect a significant amount of material to check for my own biases that might have arisen as both the participant and observer, and to explore the undefined or new domains that were slowly emerging in the open-ended format. Even some of the elaborate, complex stories that seemed off topic at the time of the interview became rich fodder for this writing.

Since none of the students had ever been interviewed, I took the time to explain both the process and why I was interviewing them, and to assure them that we could stop any time they wanted. They were well aware of the research project since I had openly talked about it through out the year, and they had signed the permission forms from the University Internal Review Board before starting the Circles.

All student interviews, which lasted between 30 to 55 minutes with an average of 42 minutes, took place in the Apartment and were taped on a digital voice recorder. The interviews with the administrative staff and teachers were held in their private offices or classrooms. All interviews were subsequently downloaded onto the computer and transcribed by me. To maintain confidentiality, both the interviews and the transcriptions

are located on an ID protected computer and the printed versions are stored together with the field notes in a locked private office.

The focus group interviews I conducted with the first four Circles in May 2010 provided another dimension to the research because of the “group effect.” This is defined as “the explicit use of the group interaction (to produce) data and insights that would be less accessible without the interaction found in a group (Morgan, 1988, p. 12).

There is a “cascading” effect in the group’s social interaction as members are influenced by each other’s ideas (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002).

The following dialogue from one of the interviews is a brief example of the “group effect” that occurred when I asked them to describe one event that stands out in their freshman year:

DI: The one event that I actually would like to share is the first day....that was probably the most stressful thing EVER!!! (*laughs*). I was like wandering around like I was half lost and then the hallways have turns.....

EY: Yeah, I did not know that they have turns... I was so... that freaked me out!

AJ: I thought it was just straight, you know.

DI: And then the teachers, like, oh my god... what kind of teacher is this person going to be ... and then I was really scared about how tall everyone was... I felt short! And then I was like... yeah, there’s some hot guys! (Circle of Surprise, IN39, 2010, p. 4)

While the “cascading” dialogues may seem inconsequential to the actual work of the Circle, such descriptive data which surfaced in both the Circles and the interviews, helped me get to know and understand the students in a more complete and comprehensive way.

## Data Analysis Techniques

To make sense of the raw data I logged for nearly two years, I needed to put it into an appropriate format for analysis, and move from coding to categorizing to identifying concepts. During data collection, I followed a modified version of the grounded theory model (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) by organizing my field notes and interview transcriptions in the coding layout described by Charmaz (2006, p. 44) and coding with gerunds.<sup>9</sup> Glaser (1978) claims that gerunds are an important tool for staying close to the data by capturing the action and for detecting processes. I found that coding with gerunds helped me zero in on the essence of an event rather than describing it superficially. This interpretive and inductive approach provided an immediate feedback system for refining the emergent themes, which I attempted to identify and develop through memo writing (Glaser, 1978).

Memo writing, claims Charmaz, 2006, is the pivotal intermediate step between data collection and writing drafts of papers because it prompts one to record thoughts and analyze data early in the research process (p. 72). Memos, which I sorted under various topic headings, served as a record of inner dialogues about emerging themes or patterns, my responses or observations to particular events, and my thoughts about potential connections among categories. In this way, data analysis occurred in parallel with data collection, allowing earlier analysis to inform later data gathering.

Once I coded the field notes and interviews in the above-mentioned format, and collapsed some of the redundant codes, I turned to a modified version of Spradley's (1979; 1980) ethnographic approach to conduct a domain analysis and begin recognizing

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<sup>9</sup> A verb functioning as a noun and ending in *ing*. Examples from my notes: Describing a best friend; Needing to let things out; Talking openly; Feeling loved in Circle.

key concepts. Domain is defined as any symbolic category that includes a variety of topics or categories that all share one feature of meaning in common (Spradley, 1979). Meanings are, according to Lofland, Snow, Anderson and Lofland (2006), “linguistic categories that define the objects to which we are oriented and thus constitute our reality and influence our action toward those objects” (p. 132). By looking for semantic relationships, or the links of meaning that connect themes and categories, I was able to create an initial list of categories with a number of subcategories. Once I refined this list, key concepts leading to the findings, which are presented in Chapters 4, 5 and 6, emerged more clearly.

### **Verification of Trustworthiness**

There is no doubt that when a researcher engages in the qualitative research process, all information “is filtered through the researcher’s eyes and ears and is influenced by his or her experience, knowledge, skill and background (Lichtman, 2010, p. 16). When I assumed the role of participant-as-observer (Gold, 1958), I became deeply enmeshed in observing the Circles, while at the same time actively participating in what I was observing. This proved to be challenging from the perspective of bias.

I could not get away from the fact that I had once lived and worked thirteen years in the Balkans from where some of the girls came and I therefore spoke a dialect of their language; I had also conducted research for two years in South Asia from where a second cultural group of girls came; and for the last fourteen years I have been a mentor for two African-American children and thus have a strong emotional tie to the third major cultural group represented in these Circles. I am aware that each of these life experiences created a filter when collecting, sorting and analyzing my data.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) emphasize that *prolonged engagement* in the field is a key factor in credible naturalistic research. One needs time to build rapport, deal with personal biases, examine distortions that surface as “a stranger in a strange land,” and focus on the most relevant details in the social setting. Having spent nearly two years in the field, with 257 hours of Circle observations and many more hours observing the students in sponsored school activities, the hallway, lunchroom, and extracurricular activities we did together outside the Circle, I was able to build a meaningful rapport with them, and eventually with many of the teachers.

A number of authors (Berg, 2001; Burgess, 1984; Lofland, Snow, Anderson, & Lofland, 2006) have discussed the issue of “identifying” with those we study. The passage of time, however, allowed me the distance to assess the emotional complexities of the field and to debrief both with “insider” gatekeepers—the social worker and principal—and with a disinterested “outsider.” The peer debriefing provided the perspective I needed to examine my biases and find a balance on the “distance-surrender” continuum (Lofland, Snow, Anderson, & Lofland, 2006).

To lend further credibility to the study, I introduced a variety of data collection methods for *triangulation* including, participant observations recorded in field notes, face-to-face interviews, and memo-writing. Throughout the study, I also conducted periodic, informal *member checks* with my key informants, especially during the face-to-face interviews, to correct my interpretation or summarization of an event they were describing or an ambiguous comment they made (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The benefit of member checking is that it provides an opportunity for respondents to clarify what they

mean and to provide additional information if necessary. This was particularly important when I did not understand certain phrases or slang being used in the vernacular.

Finally, I established an *audit trail* that tracks when, where and how data were collected. It is also a strategy, in addition to triangulation, for increasing research credibility (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). My audit trail consists of dated *field notes* stored on an ID protected computer, and printed and stored in three-ring binders; dated and undated *memos* collected through out the research period; dated *interviews* recorded and stored on an ID protected computer; *transcriptions* of the interviews stored on an ID protected computer, and printed and stored in three-ring binders; dated *artifact* information such as emails and text messages from students and social announcements; and a file with signed *permission slips* from the informants required by the Internal Review Board.

In closing, this foundational work provided the sustenance for the next four data chapters, starting with Chapter 3 and an introduction to the Talking Circles.



### CHAPTER 3 MEETING THE CIRCLES

In this chapter, I describe 9 of the 12 Talking Circles in narrative form, providing a more personal glimpse into the world of Circles from my perspective and experience as both the Circle Keeper and researcher. I have identified each Circle with a name that emerged from characteristics or qualities unique to that specific group of girls. Below is a table summarizing pertinent data.

Table 1.

*Circles, Participants, Ethnic Background, Grade Level and Period Active*

Circle of	Girls	Ethnicity	Grade Level	Period Active
#1 Surprise	DN, AJ, MI, DI SE NE	Balkans South Asia Middle East	9 <sup>th</sup> (all)	Spring, 2010
#2 Silence	NN, IM, NJ, UH, HE DI	South Asia Balkans	10 <sup>th</sup> (all)	2010-2011
#3 Congeniality	AM, LU, RH, HM HE (moved to this group)	South Asia	10 <sup>th</sup> (all) 11 <sup>th</sup> (all)	2010-2011 2011-2012
#4 Social Responsibility	LA, SA, NA GA LI, UE	Balkans Middle East African-American	9 <sup>th</sup> (all) 10 <sup>th</sup> (all)	2010-2011 2011-2012
#5 Diversity	LL, IO RA, RY YA TR	African-American	9 <sup>th</sup> 10 <sup>th</sup> 11 <sup>th</sup> 12 <sup>th</sup>	2010-2011
#6 Playfulness	TL, GE, AH, EL BR AP (replaced EL)	African-American	9 <sup>th</sup> (all) 10 <sup>th</sup> 9 <sup>th</sup>	2010-2011 2011-2012 2011-2012
#7 Volatility	DN, AJ, DA, UM AR	Balkans Northern Europe	10 <sup>th</sup> (all) 11 <sup>th</sup> (all)	2010-2011 2011-2012
#8 Resilience	ON, IE, EE, AT, TH, IY, VE	African-American	11 <sup>th</sup> 10 <sup>th</sup>	2010-2011
#9 Choices	CA, ER, SH, TA, AW	African-American	11 <sup>th</sup>	2010-2011

### **The Circle of Surprise (#1)**

The Circle of Surprise with six students came to me fully formed and intact via the gym teacher in February 2010. In many ways, this is the group I “cut my teeth on” and the one that I grew the most attached to during the first semester of Circles. It was the group that made me wonder when they split in September 2010, during their sophomore year, who needed the Circles more, them or me—hence, the Circle’s name (FN37). I never expected them to split.

Four of the students were born in the Balkans and came to the United States as children; one was from the Middle East and another from South Asia. Two of the girls (DI and MI) within the Balkan contingency were soft-spoken and reserved, serious about their grades and on the outskirts of any school drama. The other two, DN and AJ, were best friends from middle school, impulsive and explosive, and showed definite tendencies towards school drama, especially in relational issues. The other two members, SE from South Asia, who wore the *hijab* (head covering) and jeans, and NE from the Middle East, who wore a black *abaya* (a long loose-fitting outer garment) and a *hijab* were somewhere in between—both vivacious, reflective, and focused on academics, but also not immune to relational conflicts, especially NE.

Four of the girls came from two-parent families with siblings; another from an intergenerational home that included her grandparents, her mother who delivered her at age 15 and eight male cousins and uncles; and one from a single parent home run by her father since her mother abandoned her and her brother when they were children. All were born into and practiced the religion of Islam from different cultural perspectives, some with greater fervor than others.

Even though they grew up together in the same multicultural community and attended the same public schools, they all admitted later that the Circle helped them dispel some of the earlier stereotypes they had had about each other. In fact, during the first Circle, one of the girls turned to the other and said; “I’ve learned more about you in this last hour than I have since we’ve known each other in elementary school” (CN1/1).<sup>10</sup>

The topics they discussed during the Circles were dynamic and thought provoking, especially since perspectives and opinions varied between those coming from the more and the less traditional cultural backgrounds. For instance, once we were talking about where they would like to be in their careers ten years from now and, after they each described a professional, independent life style, the young Arab woman suddenly injected that at 14, boys from her culture were already “asking for her hand” to “sort of reserve her for the future.” In fact, “one boy and his family have offered to pay \$50,000,” she claimed giggling, explaining that it is really a compliment and that that’s “what we do in our culture.” Everyone was quiet and then with genuine curiosity, MI placidly but poignantly asked, “Well, how do you feel about that.... I mean being paid for? Does it make you happy?” (CN1/4). This exploded into an animated dialogue about arranged marriages, love marriages, and the influence of their parents on whom they were going to marry (or not) and how they were going to live their lives.

There were other “ah-ah” conversations that challenged the girls to think multi-dimensionally. One that particularly comes to mind was on leadership and women. When I asked what qualities they looked for in a leader, they listed “caring, being trustworthy, keeping promises, doing the right thing, being patient and respectful and

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<sup>10</sup> CN1/1= Circle Notes, Circle #1, Day 1 (see Appendix A)

having a big heart.“ When I questioned whether women bring any special gifts to leadership roles, they thought women overall are “more caring, more compassionate and understanding, and they don’t start wars.” I then took the inquiry a step further and asked them to list their own leadership qualities and whether they ever saw themselves in future leadership positions. Some of their comments included: “I am able to take a stand and speak my voice!” “I have compassion and am trustworthy!” Another, “I am caring and want to do what’s right for people.” It was split down the middle as to who wanted to be a leader in the future. The two quiet ones from the Balkans, DI and MI, and SE from South Asia could not envision themselves as leaders, but the other two from the Balkans, DN and AJ, and the Arab girl, NE, said yes, they thought they might be. Interestingly, all appeared surprised, and pleased, when I pointed out that the personal qualities they identified within themselves matched the exact qualities they most admired in strong, reliable leaders (CN1/5).

MI described how such reflective questions posed during the Circles helped her see life and her self in a different way:

The questions that you’re asked, it’s just questions that you never think about before. That’s what makes the Circle... are the questions..... They just make you think about yourself in ways that you wouldn’t think if you were on your own. It just made me think of things deeper ... on a deeper level. (MI, IN6, 2011, p. 7)

At the end of school year, I conducted a focused-group interview to explore various dimensions of their shared experiences in the Circle. The *code of confidentiality*, they said, was particularly important because it gave them the confidence to be open and vulnerable without worrying about their private information being shared outside the Circle.

AJ: I like coming here because we get to talk about all of our problems and if there is anything that we need to say to everybody, we know that it is all kept a secret. That no one tells anybody else... and it all stays inside the Circle. (CN1/10)

SE: I like that if you have any stress or anything, you can just explain it, tell it and then it will be lifted. Sometimes you have things that you can't tell people that you know. You can come here and tell and you know that no one will say anything and you know that they can help you with your problems. (CN1/10)

Observing how their friends have *similar problems* and how they handle them, helped each of the girls cope with and resolve their own difficulties. SE explained it this way:

I thought that some of the problems I have, that I was the only one and when I heard that everyone also has problems, I thought... hey, everyone else has the same kinds of problems and it made me feel a lot better that I am not the only one. (CN1/10)

The Circle helped her

because people have told me how they deal with their problems and it has helped me figure out how I should deal with mine. Not the way I did before—like ignoring them—or not dealing with it at all, but talking to them if there is a problem with someone outside the group. (CN1/10)

The Circle also served as a “container” in which they could *release their stress* rather than letting it build and explode in inappropriate places or times. AJ claimed “it gives you like this sense of relief. It's not all bottled up inside of you and then it's going to come out in the wrong way.” It makes her “feel better... like you come to the Circle you can tell everybody your problem and you don't have to keep it inside” (CN1/10).

By learning how to listen to each other, they began to understand that people have *different views and perspectives about life*. DI thinks that

I'm more a good listener than I was before... like, if I'm mad... I like step back a little more. Like people have to hear all sides of the story.... You can see the other side and see why the opposing person is mad at

you... you can understand things better. So I'm starting to face conflict a little bit more. (CN1/10)

Listening also taught them about the value of *respect and not judging others* as both DI and NE explain:

DI: Like now, I understand that all of us have our own problems and it makes you understand people better. Like you shouldn't judge them for something they've done. (CN1/10)

NE: I think it made me respect... like just have more respect in relationship with them, cause like, yeah... not everyone's perfect. (CN1/10)

The Circle ended on a high note at the end of the school year with the girls promising to get together in one of the local cafes before school started in the fall. Early in the summer I was receiving texts that said, "Its going to suck without the circle ☹ it was my life saver. I love you" (DN, personal communication, June 10, 2010), and towards the end of the summer, "OMG mrs. Ann I am soo excited to see you and excited for this year to start and I'm glad we have a good room for our circles how have you been" (AJ, personal communication, August 19, 2010).

By September, however, I could see that the group dynamics were changing. SE, the South Asian student, was being transferred to a "better school" by her parents, and the tension, unbeknownst to me, that had been brewing since the summer between three of the others was escalating. At first no one wanted to tell me about the conflict since four of the remaining five still wanted to keep the Circle. Not wanting to probe, and understanding that young friendships naturally shift and change, I waited patiently while they tried to sort out their interpersonal issues.

By the third week of school, the two best friends asked for mediation with me, which seemed to resolve some of their misunderstandings, but the third student having

conflict with both of them, began giving clear signals of wanting to leave the group. Whatever the outcome, I knew the group had to meet so they could decide the fate of the Circle together rather than placing the blame on one and negating the exceptional experiences they already had had together.

That gathering proved powerful, synergistic and final even though when we entered the Circle, no one really expected it to end. Initially, the girls who wanted to keep the Circle discussed the best times to meet and expressed their need for having a Circle “so we can get through our sophomore year!” They glossed over the internal conflicts that were fomenting below the surface and a cloud of unease and confusion hovered like a balloon over the room. When the talking piece came to MI (the quiet student who spoke the least and who wanted to keep the Circle), she named the “elephant in the room” by simply, quietly and heavy heartedly saying, “I feel... I feel like the Circle is falling apart.” That was it. Tears welled up in her eyes, and the others unabashedly started crying. One student mumbled dejectedly, “I feel like when my dog died” (CN1/15). I felt the same way.

After a few moments of silence to regain our composure, I knew that we needed closure to the Circle (Baldwin, 1994; Bolen, 1999; Pranis, 2005). Remembering that I had some colorful ribbons in my bag, I pulled them out carefully and gave one to each of them. I asked that we go around the Circle and say what we needed for closure of this very unique experience and time in our lives. Each person spoke from their heart describing what the Circle meant to them; how it had been special for them to belong to something in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade; how it had helped them become less judgmental; how it

helped them to understand each other more; and, even though they were no longer in a Circle together, they could still be friends, since “after all, we go to the same school!”

I then invited them to go around again and tie their ribbon to the person’s on their right, while describing what they are most grateful for. In a shared reality of total openness and raw vulnerability, one after the other spoke of her appreciation for what she had personally learned by being in the Circle. I heard such comments barely spoken above a whisper, “This is my family;” “It made me feel secure amidst all of the fighting and police here;” “I got to know everyone on a deeper level;” and “I learned to be more respectful of other people’s opinions.” We lifted up the circle of tied colorful ribbons, laid it carefully on the center floor piece, took each other’s hands, held them in silence, until I finally said, “Thank you.” It was over, but we all knew that we had been touched on a level beyond words by the power of the Circle we had created together (CN1/15).

About a month later, I wrote in my journal, trying to understand what had happened to me, not only as a Circle Keeper, but also as a researcher.

I’m trying to understand my role in these Circles and am surprised by the grieving process I have gone through since the disbandment of this Circle. So how do I keep the researcher separate from the participant? I see that I cannot. I see that I too feel like one feels when “a pet dies.” (FN41)



## The Circle of Silence (#2)

Five bright students—four from South Asia (NN, IM, HE, UH) and one from the Balkans (DI)—wanted to form a new Circle together in the fall of their sophomore year after their two separate Circles from their freshman year had undergone significant changes. The Circle of Surprise to which DI belonged had disbanded and she “missed being in a Circle,” and a Circle of South Asian students had expanded to nine and needed to be divided. This led to the creation of two new groups: the Circle of Congeniality (described in the succeeding story) and the Circle of Silence, named for its quiet intelligence and demeanor.

All five immigrated to the United States at a very young age with parents fleeing war or economic hardship and seeking a better life. The four from South Asia, who wear the *hijab* (head covering), are intimately involved with the values of their culture, as well as with the problems and lives of their immediate and extended families, who live both in the local community, across the United States and overseas. DI, who is close to her conservative immigrant parents, but often challenges their traditional cultural views, still has extended family living in the Balkans with few relatives in the United States. Each girl comes from intact two-parent homes with siblings, a stay-at-home or part-time working mother and working fathers who, at times, have experienced the perils of lay offs.

From the beginning, this group not only was split ideologically between more and less traditional, conservative outlooks on life, but also individually as they varied in personalities from effervescent and excitable, to reticent and composed. What stands out about this group is that in spite of meeting 24 times during the academic year, they never

reached a depth of intimacy that I observed in all of the other Circles. Measured in their demeanor of expression, they rarely, and some never, revealed aspects of their personal lives, with the exception of DI, who tried sharing something private several times, only to retreat when the others were not as forthcoming (CN2/9). During our end-of-year interview, when she was comparing her experiences between the two Circles in her freshman and sophomore years, she observed that,

the people in the Circle I'm with right now are like...ah... they don't have problems I've noticed. They seem to be very content with their lives and last year (*in her freshman year*) we had issues that we actually talked about. (DI, IN2, 2011, p. 1)

Once when DI was feeling particularly frustrated with the lack of openness in the Circle, she tactfully told them that she felt like she was the only one stressed and that “everyone else seems so content and non-stressed” (CN2/15). Even though the others protested that they were also stressed, their burning issues tended to focus mainly on their frustrations and concerns about classes and homework (especially math), problems with teachers, upcoming tests, parent-teacher conferences, and what their parents might say about their grades. DI wanted to go deeper than that.

All of them were future-oriented with long-term goals for their academic careers and marriage (except for DI), as dictated by the mores of their culture. Some of the more common topics brought up in other Circles—such as relational conflicts, boys, homecoming or prom, family problems, or self-esteem issues—were not subjects that spontaneously emerged in the Circle unless I included them in some way in the topic of the day. Their extraordinarily rich conversations about the cultural conflicts they experienced as first generation immigrants and young Muslim women being raised in

traditional families were the closest they came to discussing more personal issues (CN2/7; CN2/10; CN2/11).

I wondered why they all had near perfect attendance and what they were actually receiving from the group that made them want to return each week. Thus, I asked midway through the year why they wanted to come to the Circle and their spontaneous comments were insightful: “It lets me get out my feelings! I have so much bundled up in here that I want to explode sometimes!” “I keep everything bottled up and here I can open up! It keeps me from being stressed out!” “It’s made me feel closer to everyone here in group!” “In the end, it makes us better people” (CN2/10).

Still perplexed by their quiet and reserved demeanor, I struggled to think of new topics for discussion each week and to prepare questions that would not only challenge and encourage deeper levels of reflection, but would also help them move beyond the intellectual, left-brain distance I perceived they were placing between themselves and the topics of discussion. This forced me to look at other creative avenues and introduce a project on the meaning of adages and maxims (CN2/11), the creation of six-word stories (CN2/12), and a collage to honor their womanhood (CN2/14). While all of these proved to be worthwhile and intellectually stimulating, I still sensed a hesitancy to open up in the Circle and was concerned that my role had evolved into a Circle facilitator rather than a Circle Keeper, which was not my original intention.

Was the fundamental issue a lack of trust? DI wondered whether, even though they were all friends, she might be the reason for them not opening up since she was the newest member of the group.

I don’t think we trust each other enough and I feel like I’m very much the cause of that because we’ve all had major changes (*referring to changing*

*groups*)...I was added to the Circle and now I feel like it's starting over and it's very hard to do that. (DI, IN2, 2011, p. 2)

One of the other students seemed to confirm DI's suspicions about the lack of trust factor, but not attributing it necessarily to DI:

I think it was just that we really didn't have any personal issues with each other. Maybe some of the girls didn't feel too comfortable bringing in their other issues with the other girls there. (NN, personal communication, October 9, 2011)

Another student thought that maybe it was just that they were all "kind of changing and separating in a way.... just drifting apart" and did not know how to share that with each other (HE, IN5, 2011, p. 4).

This "just drifting apart" appeared to have been the reason that HE abruptly decided to move over to the other South Asian group, the Circle of Congeniality, without a formal announcement to this Circle (CN2/10). Not appearing to be particularly disturbed by this re-shuffling since all of the South Asians were friends (including DI), the girls immediately decided to bring in another South Asian girl (NJ) whom they all knew well. Even though I seemed to be the most surprised by this re-structuring without a lot of fanfare, I agreed, wanting to observe how it would evolve. When I inquired in the Circle about their feelings concerning this change, DI and the others said they wanted to keep the Circle "because it was important" and that was about all that was said regarding the change other than deciding who to bring into the group (CN2/11).

I wondered whether there was actually a cultural difference between my own assumptions of interpersonal interactions and theirs. Even though they were being raised in the United States—a highly individualistic society that gives priority to personal goals over those of the collective—three of the four were growing up within a small

“collectivistic” community or subculture that abided by specific standards of social behavior, especially for women (Hall, 1959; Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2001). Generally, members of a collectivistic society emphasize the importance of relational harmony and fitting in with others; deference to higher-status people based on age, rank and seniority; acting in accordance to group norms and practicing self-restraint (Oetzel, 1998; Ting-Toomey, 1999). Thus, I wondered whether my presence as a higher-status adult, as well as their culture’s expectations for practicing self-restraint in expressing emotion, might also be factors in the outcome of the Circle. Yet this did not seem to be an issue in the other Circles.

Long after the 2010 - 2011 school year ended, I was in an email dialogue with one of the students regarding a project she needed help with. At the end of her email, she wrote, “I really do miss the Circles... We made some great memories the last two years” (NN, personal communication, October 6, 2011). This surprised me and I responded by asking her to help me understand what she missed about the Circles. She replied,

Well, even though we rarely talked about anything personal, I still felt like through the Circle, I got closer with my friends. First of all, during freshman year, I hardly knew some of the girls in the Circle but because of the Circles, I started to actually talk to them outside of the Circles. Because of that, I made some great friends that I am grateful to have. So even though we really didn’t talk about anything personal (*in the new group*), I feel like I still made some great memories.  
(NN, personal communication, October 8, 2011)

Her response forced me to confront my own expectations and biases about the “purpose” of the Circle and face the reality that perhaps much more occurs in and out of the Circle than I am aware of. After all, I only see them an hour each week and have limited contact with them during school. Perhaps I had to admit that different Circles have different *raison d’etre* and since they are co-created by the participants themselves,

the Circle represents the personalities and stages of growth of its individual members. It is not my role either as a researcher or a Circle Keeper to judge.

In the end, of all the student interviews, this Circle provided some of the most articulate and provocative insights into the meaning of the shared Circle experience which guided me in identifying prominent themes pulsating through all of the Circles. For instance, some of their themes included the importance of having a *safe, secure and quiet place* to come to each week where they “can just like breathe” (HE, IN5, 2011, p. 5) because, “it’s like a home to us” (HE, IN5, 2011, p. 10). The weekly meeting provided *stability* – a constant they could depend upon which became a part of their life, “because it’s something that hasn’t changed...it’s just like holding on to something that is familiar” (NN, IN3, 2011, p. 4). The Circle became a place to *release stress* because “instead of bottling things up, you can open up. Once you let out your problems, then it won’t bother you. ...” (IM, IN4, 2011, p. 3). They learned to feel closer to *people different from themselves* “because it’s like insight into someone else’s head (DI, IN2, 2011, p. 3) and you “just like everybody more” (NN, IN3, 2011, p. 2). This led them to become *less judgmental* and “*more understanding*” (HE, IN5, 2011, p. 6) because they realized “you shouldn’t judge people on first impression and what you hear about someone” (DI, IN2, 2011, p. 6). Finally the Circle inspired them to *know themselves better* because the questions we discussed made them “think about things which helped” them “mature” (NN, IN3, 2011, p. 6).

By the end of the school year, sensing that the Circle probably would not continue into the next academic year, we all decided to take a field trip together one Saturday to art galleries in a town nearby and closed this Circle with gratitude, appreciation and fun!

### Circle of Congeniality (#3)

The second group of South Asian girls (AM, LU, RH, HM) who wanted to form a Circle together—the Circle of Congeniality—arrived in the Apartment neatly dressed in dark, lightly embroidered *abayas* (long loose-fitting outer garment) with a *hijab* (head covering) or in long skirts or pants with long-sleeve blouses and a *hijab*. To this day, they stand out as one of the most reflective, cohesive and homogenous of the Circles—hence, their Circle name. Before the age of five, all except one immigrated to the United States with their parents who were in search of better economic opportunities. Today their home country seems far away and, while they would like to “get in touch with their roots and relatives” (CN3/2), they show no interest in returning there to live. Coming from very close-knit, extended families, with relatives spread throughout the United States, they each identify their immigrant families, especially their parents, as their main source of support and strength.

As high academic achievers, like the Circle of Silence, they spent some of their Circle time each week discussing their fears and frustrations about pending progress reports and their parents’ responses; unyielding teachers who gave them too much homework; or the upcoming ACT exam and the exaggerated potential ruin of their academic life. A few were involved in extracurricular activities, such as Student Council, the National Honors Society or the new pilot Peer Mentoring program, but their protective immigrant parents closely monitored any after-school functions.

With parents who speak limited English, some of the students were involved in teaching their fathers how to use the computer, in paying household bills or stepping in as surrogate parents for school-related issues with younger brothers and sisters. These

familial responsibilities were added to the cultural expectations that they, as young South Asian women, must also help with the cooking and cleaning in their family home.

“Slacking off” was not an option. There simply was no time.

Their career goals ranged from being a psychologist and a pharmacist to a registered nurse, a teacher and an architect. When I inquired about potential obstacles to achieving their long-term ambitions, the ‘future architect’ adamantly expressed her concern that she “might end up with a husband who would make me stay at home!” (CN3/3) This statement poignantly represents the internal struggles they face today as they seek to merge and then integrate the values of their more traditional South Asian Muslim culture, to which they are deeply attached, with the American culture that is pulling them towards greater independence.

Since marriage is the keystone to the stability and maintenance of their cultural values, one vibrant Circle discussion focused on the dynamics of “arranged” and “love” marriages. Several supported arranged marriages, claiming they “work better and last longer because parents know what is best for their children and people lose interest in each other too quickly in a love marriage” (CN3/3). Yet, others questioned the merits of an arranged marriage because

all eyes are on you and they look at your flaws. They even check your feet because they say if you have clean and nice feet then you are good. They check your legs too. They don’t do any of this for the boys. They only check that they have an education, but nothing else. This puts so much pressure on the girls. (CN3/3)

Another girl agreed and added,

The men are always looking for women with light skin, who can cook, take care of kids, be a mediator and look after the older people (CN3/5). In our culture the girl usually goes to live with the boy’s family and the girl then does all of the labor. They are expected to take care of the family



and cook, and generally the mother-in-law will live with the oldest son. This also puts too much pressure on the girl. If the girl gets divorced, it is very difficult for her to get married again. (CN3/3)

Stories revealing other mores of their culture and religion, as well as some of the daily challenges they face, were interwoven throughout many of the Circle discussions. For instance, dating is not allowed. If one of them is ever seen talking to a guy outside of school, someone will call her parents, “embellish the story,” and get her in “serious trouble” (CN3/5). In fact, they said, the parents sometimes will believe the caller over them. Being on Facebook with a lot of pictures of friends is also frowned upon because “a man doesn’t want someone who is too well known and has lots of friends.” People might draw the wrong conclusions and talk badly about her, which would affect the status of her family in the community (CN3/5).

Growing up Muslim in the United States is another topic they wanted to discuss because it hurt and worried them that they might be targeted as “terrorists” when they wear their *abayas* or the *hijab* out into the greater American society (CN3/1). Their local religious community expects them to wear this form of dress as representation of the modesty they are to embody. In fact, this view is so ingrained in their society that it is not uncommon, according to RH, for some men to call a girl’s parents and criticize them for letting her out in public without the *hijab* (CN3/5). Overall, I observed that concern about what neighbors might think is a strong motivating factor for keeping the structural and cultural norms of their community intact.

What stands out about this group is its cohesiveness, which may be attributed to its single ethnic, single gender composition and the unspoken innate understanding they have of each other. As RH put it, “we have a lot in common! I learned that we have

similar lives!” (RH, IN15, 2011, p. 4) They did not identify themselves as “best friends” in the classical sense, but they are friends, and this friendship served as the foundation upon which they grounded the rhythm and flow of their dialogues. Even I, as an outsider, could easily follow this flow.

They were a “model” Circle according to all of the books. They respectfully followed the dialogic format using the talking piece; stayed fully engaged during the Circle hour; rarely veered off topic and always remained caring and attentive towards each other. In fact, they were such a “model group,” that when I was asked to teach adults in a local mediation center how to run these types of proactive Talking Circles in schools, I invited eight of them to join the Circle of Congeniality at different times, to learn the process directly from the students.

The problem was that they were so composed and self-controlled that I was totally unaware, until much later, about a month-long conflict between two of them that was so serious they were not speaking to each other even while we were in the Circle. I was shocked that I had been unable to detect tension or dissension within the group and became concerned about other subtleties I might be missing within the group dynamics. I was used to conflicts periodically erupting between friends in other Circles, but those were usually boisterous and emotional.

This group chose to handle the conflict in silence and it only came to my attention during a personal interview with AM who was caught in between and feeling stressed because “I love them both and I want them to be friends but I guess it is hard for them to be friends right now” (AM, IN8, 2011, p. 1). I recognized that once again, as in the Circle of Silence, I might be facing another manifestation of collectivistic cultural values

in the way they handle conflict since within that culture emotions are not openly expressed and arguing in public is frowned upon (Hall, 1959; Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2001).

In spite of the “serious conflict,” which they eventually resolved, they never missed a Circle, and when the visiting guests quizzed them about the Circle, one piped up and said, “The Circle feels like a family to me... we are like sisters. There’s no other place to talk like this but here” (CN3/22). In fact, one of the two girls involved in the “serious conflict” even said that the Circle “is a place where I can talk about my problems and be honest. We have created a bond between friends” (CN3/21). Another said,

we have learned how much we have in common. Even though we were “friends,” we really became friends here. The Circle has helped us stay together. We share our issues. I realize that I am not the only one with issues. We have the same issues! (CN3/22)

What were some of these issues? For both LU and AM, it was dealing with *anger and trying to get along better with their families*. By listening to how others behave with their siblings, LU said she made the decision to stop hitting her younger brothers and sisters when they annoyed her and thought this decision was an important step in her personal growth.

I think that all of the other girls (*in the Circle*), they’re really nice. They tend to solve problems without anything like that (*slapping*). They also have the same problems with siblings. I know a lot of people had that problem, so I know that if other people can solve it without like slapping anybody..... then I can do it too...(LU, IN20, 2011, p. 4)

LU, after listening to what the other girls said about their parents, also decided to try to improve her relationship with her mother by

having more conversations with her. Before I’d kinda ignore her. You know, cause I didn’t like her talking a lot. ‘Cause she gives too many lectures but then I learned, oh, as a teen, that’s their job to give you

lectures because they're trying to teach you to be a better person. So I was like, O.K., maybe what's she's saying actually means something. (LU, IN20, 2011, p.4)

When I asked whether her parents noticed any difference in her, she smiled broadly and said,

Yeah, they realize how I've changed. Like they realize that I'm not.... That I learned how to control myself without letting me boil over with anger.... (LU, IN20, 2011, p.4) I learned to talk to people better and my attitude actually changed... like I respect people more. I treat people the way they treat me so this group, this Circle helped me change who I am for a better person really. (LU, IN20, 2011, p.3)

AM thought the calmness she always felt in the others and in herself during the Circle time helped her with her anger, especially when dealing with her father. She describes how she changed her early morning responses to him when he was driving her to school each day.

I realized that in the morning when my Dad drops us off, sometimes he gets a little cranky... He'll yell and before when he yelled, I would like have something to say back, and now like every day in the morning, when he has something to say, I'll just be quiet, because I'm the person that would talk back to my parents. Now I realize that when they have something to say, I'm just like quiet now. I just take it in and say, "O.K." That's a BIG change!!!! My mom realizes it too. (AM, IN8, 2011, p. 7)

*Learning how to listen better* was also something they taught each other in the Circle. As AM explained, now when she is in a disagreement with someone,

I listen to that person's story and then I say my point of view and it just solves everything out. That's how I feel right now... Right now I feel changed and different and I love this difference in me. (AM, IN8, 2011, p. 4)

When I asked what we did in the Circle that helped her change her behavior during a conflict, she said she observed how effective it was to watch

people taking their turn in talking.... Like one person tells their story and you tell your story. That's how you can solve problems and I just realized

that. *I use that as a basis in everyday life.* It taught me like you might have a different point of view from another person, but you still have to respect that person for what they say and who they are and you can't just start arguing.... So that's what I realized. (AM, IN8, 2011, p. 4)

Thus, even though the “serious conflict” was never openly discussed in the Circle, the Circle process as well as the bond between them taught them life-changing skills in anger management and conflict resolution.

In closing, over the year, as interpersonal connections deepened through dialogue and sharing, *their own voice as young women*, like AM's, began to form and find expression.

Like being with the group... I just realized that women are intelligent. They do have many, many perspectives to say about certain stuff and we're not just like little ladies, or girls that just walk around quiet.... You know, we have stuff to say. We have our mind. We're very intelligent and we know how to use that intelligence in everyday life. I realized that and I use it! I use it more often now. I don't think that I should just sit back and just relax. I realize that I'm really a sharp person!  
(AM, IN8, 2011, p. 9)

Perhaps access to this core knowledge about themselves will ultimately bridge the two cultures in which they are being raised and struggling to integrate.

### Circle of Social Responsibility (#4)

My first introduction to the Circle of Social Responsibility was made by the middle school Restorative Practices coordinator who recommended the girls for a Circle because they could “easily fall through the cracks without some guidance” (CN4/1). Breezing through the usual phase of awkwardness and causal talk that most groups go through the first time they meet, this Circle of 9<sup>th</sup> graders moved right into the heavy topic of segregation—a social justice issue they saw as a problem at their school. “It’s not really intentional” they said, “it’s just that people tend to stay with their friends and very few ‘cross over.’” One comment built upon another and excitedly they shared ideas about how their class might be able to change the school climate “even though we’re just freshmen.” “After all,” they said, “their class had grown close when building one of the first freshmen floats for Homecoming and never mind that it almost fell apart or that they didn’t win” (CN4/1).

By the end of the hour, the decision was unanimous to contact the principal about the possibility of bringing Challenge Day to the high school—a nationwide school program they had seen on MTV that helps students from diverse backgrounds understand each other better. Admittedly, I too was drawn into their contagious enthusiasm and readily agreed to talk to the principal ahead of their meeting with her (CN4/1). Here was a wealth of untapped energy that wanted to make the world a better place. How could I not help?

After a few initial adjustments, the group settled in with three girls from the Balkans, one girl of Middle Eastern origin dressed in a dark grey *abaya* (a long loose-fitting outer garment) and a *hijab* (a headscarf), and one African American girl. Three of

the five girls arrived in the United States before the age of 5 from a troubled and dangerous homeland. Now they are Americans; they are friends; and they have ‘crossed-over.’

In crossing-over, *they have become family*. “I see the girls as my family,” says LA, “It’s about caring, ‘cause we all care for each other.... and we stick together”

(LA, IN11, 2011, p. 1). Because they were like family, NA said, “every Tuesday night I’d wonder what we were going to talk about ... I’d think about seeing everyone; about our time together... I looked forward to that every week” (CN4/15).

Each week their animated discussions varied on topics of their choice, ranging from career goals, puberty, family issues, empowerment and how to make a difference in the world, to the best ways of accepting change and loss, dealing with gossip and conflict, and racism (CN4/3; CN4/4; CN4/5; CN4/7; CN4/8; CN4/12; CN4/13; CN4/18; CN4/26; CN4/28; CN4/30). The Circle hour ebbed and flowed between a more structured dialogue using the talking piece and taking turns to speak, to a free-flowing style of conversation that emerged spontaneously when passions and beliefs were aroused. They were never a group that lapsed into long awkward silences for lack of anything to say. Always eager to participate and stretch their views, the quiet ones found their voice and the more assertive ones melted into the whole.

During stressful times at home, they were there for each other—when a brother on drugs physically threatened her mother (CN4/8); when a father grew more and more distant from her and her family (CN4/2); and when a mother was upset discovering that she liked an Arab boy (CN4/11). They stood by each other when a girl’s family continually called her names, such as “fat ass,” and lowered her self-esteem (CN4/5);

when a girl's boyfriend abruptly departed, leaving her devastated (CN4/14); and when parents talked about the "old country" and were unable to relate to their budding independence (CN4/10). They encouraged each other to tell the truth to their parents when they were caught in a lie (CN4/11); to stand up, but cautiously, to the bully behavior of a brother (CN4/4; CN4/12); and to stay away from "bad company that corrupts the character" (CN4/12).

Idyllic as this might read, they also faced stress that was so intense that the Circle almost ended. An emotional conflict between SA and NA (close friends and distant cousins from the Balkans), generated by fear and loss over the pending move of NA and her family out of the closely-knit ethnic community, was more than each of the girls could handle. Yet, with the skillful intervention and passionate pleas of the other members to talk it out—so "our Circle doesn't break up"—the two girls eventually reconciled, after three long weeks, with hugs and tears within the safe space of the Circle. The experience of openly and honestly facing conflict left everyone a bit wiser and stronger (CN4/6; CN4/7).

I tell this story because it was the bond between them that provided fodder for the emergence of several new, socially responsible programs that we established in both the high school and middle school that same and succeeding year (described in Chapter 6). As their freshman school year drew to a close, the Circle of Social Responsibility continued to hash out plans about how they might become leaders in their school and community. Three of the five girls chose to run and were each elected as class officers for their upcoming sophomore year. The others discussed contacting their community leaders or the local mosque during the summer about cleaning up the trash littering the



streets, placing more recycling bins in prominent places, and “stopping the waste of water,” as described on the Disney Channel (CN4/18).

When I asked what it means to make a difference in the world, one passionately said, “I don’t know why but the Circle has made me want to do good and to be good to others.” Another one followed with, “Yeah, we need to be that person that cares about others! We need to make an impact” (CN4/18). As I sat absorbed in their rich wealth of creative energy and wisdom, I wondered how often adults miss hearing what these committed youth have to say. I thought about how much we might learn if we only listened, and listened to them respectfully. At that moment, I fully understood that I had been given permission to enter their private world to listen and for this, I am profoundly grateful.

### Circle of Diversity (#5)

One morning while walking through a sea of students chattering, yelling, or jostling each other as they changed from one class to another, I heard, “Ms. Ann!” and turned to see the principal who was standing next to LL, an attractive mixed-race girl looking agitated, hesitant and street smart. “LL said she would like to be in a Circle,” the new, young female principal gently states, as the three of us continue walking down the corridor. The caring principal turns to me and quietly says, “She needs a place to find her voice” (CN5/1).

At the time, LL already had over 70 write-ups from middle school and the first few months of high school for behavior other than ideal for an academic setting. Even I, as an outsider, had heard her name mentioned several times. She was considered smart, lost and angry. To express this anger she would periodically pound lockers with her fists making loud, crashing sounds as she walked down the hallways. I said, “sure,” not fully aware of what I had just said “sure” to, and proceeded to describe the Circles to LL before the class bell rang. By the next morning, LL had provided the principal with her list of “friends,” and the Circle of Diversity, which she called “LL’s Circle,” was born.

This young freshman girl, whose magnetic charm and leadership capabilities were often the downfall of others, had pulled together a surprisingly diverse group of African American students ranging in age, levels of maturity, personalities, and academic goals—hence, the Circle’s name. One was a graduating senior in the National Honor’s Society; another was a freshman who seemed lost to the world of boys and their hormones; one was a junior who was cautious and precocious but failing academically; another was a sophomore who dreamed of going to Italy and missed too many days of school caring for

her brothers and sisters; and another was a sophomore who was parentless, wise and sad. All of them were smart; all of them were from unstable, unpredictable home environments.

My usual routine when I first met with a new Circle was to review the fundamental guidelines, which include *confidentiality, speaking from the heart, being honest and being respectful* to each other. For some reason, I decided to go a step further and asked them for additional guidelines they deemed appropriate for their Circle. Unexpectedly, LL jumped up, eagerly wanting to write these guidelines on the poster board I had placed on the heavy mahogany table near by.

Their final list, over which they energetically deliberated, was written as follows: *No hitting, Respect and Trust, No violence, Cannot be fake, No snitching, No cell phone use during deep conversation, and No saying 'shut up' (CN5/2)*. They defined “deep conversation” as that which brings up issues causing sadness and tears. They allowed themselves the right to send and receive text messages, but I confronted this at a later date when it felt disrespectful to the values of the Circle. I was actually taken aback by their inclusion of ‘no violence’ and ‘no hitting’ for that seemed to be antithetical to the concept of a Circle, let alone school rules. I began to wonder, however, as I watched them relish in the power of choice and responsibility, whether they were trying to co-create an ideal environment that was decidedly different from the world in which they currently inhabited.

From the very beginning, it was a challenge to follow this group’s conversation for they often spoke in their vernacular, especially when they moved seamlessly and passionately into the narratives of their day, their week or their past. There were words

and expressions I did not know, which Agar (1994) defines as “rich points” or speech acts that contain and define cultural knowledge, and there were contexts to which I could not relate. Often I had this unique sense of being invisible and, as my notes confirm, “it’s kind of me being on the outside, looking in” (CN5/4). Yet, I did not experience this invisibility as rejection, but rather as an offhand compliment that I was someone who was silent and non-judgmental enough for them to be themselves.

I could not relate, however, to the story of a mother who stayed in bed with her boyfriend while her daughter was calling her with severe headaches after being hit playing volleyball. She called her mother a “dead-beat parent” (CN5/3). I could not comprehend how the uncle of the parentless girl could threaten to put her out on the streets and keep “his own children in the house” when she had nowhere to go but to the streets (CN5/3). I could not understand what it must be like to have a “daddy”—the only person she really loves—in prison for a murder she claims he did not commit. “It was an accident,” she said. “He happened to be holding the gun when it went off. Someone else shot the woman’s baby daddy” (RA, IN27, 2011, p.3). I could not understand how a grandmother could text her granddaughter during school the day before and tell her, “You won’t amount to nothin’” (CN5/7).

During these stories replete with vivid images and rich nuances, they often interrupted each other with utterances of support, outrage, advice or a story of their own to illustrate their empathic understanding. Reminding them to use the talking ball almost seemed sacrilegious to the norms of their cultural interactions and I chose to respect this.

While the group may have been pulled together by LL, it was TR, the one going to college—the wise one—whom everyone looked up to. She was one of them, but

different, and the Circle not only awakened this knowledge in her, it also empowered her.

“I learned that I was a role model to a lot of people that I didn’t know at first,” she revealed in our interview,

I learned, like, when I came into the Circle and how I explained what I accomplished (*I had asked each of them to list three accomplishments*), I was proud of myself. You know, makin’ it to the colleges and being in the National Honors’ Society, and stuff like that. That made my day!  
(TR, IN9, 2011, p. 3)

TR was also the one who prevented a potentially volatile situation from turning into a lunchroom brawl and the expulsion of most of the girls in the Circle, described in Chapter 6. Choosing to intervene and prevent a fight was testimony to TR’s emerging leadership among her friends, especially among the younger members of the group who still enjoyed a good fight once in awhile because it was fun, “especially like when you do got a lot of anger in you and you can just take it out on that person. It be fun” (YA, IN25, 2011, p. 7). While physical fighting could be partly for entertainment, partly for revenge and partly for release of anger, when I once asked in the Circle whether fighting really resolves a conflict, LL immediately retorted, “No, it doesn’t resolve anything, ‘cause you keep being mad at that person when you see them again and again” (CN5/14).

Of the 17 times the Circle met during the year, TR, the senior, and LL, the freshman, were the most consistent, each missing only twice. For TR it was because she was getting ready for prom or taking her senior pictures; for LL, it was because she was suspended for indiscipline. Throughout the Circles, LL’s behavior and moods ranged from sullen to cheerful depending on her home circumstances and events at school. While emotionally unpredictable, her Circle of friends remained steadfast and supportive,

often sharing their collective wisdom with her. For instance, when LL was struggling to choose between two romantic partners, she sought the group's advice.

Look, you wouldn't have been interested in NZ if you were O.K. with JK and you wouldn't still be interested in JK if everything was O.K. with NZ.... So it seems to me that you aren't happy with either. Besides you can't have two relationships going on at the same time. (CN5/17)

Another time LL mentioned that she might have to go to *'juvi'* (their abbreviation for the juvenile detention center) because her parents' rights were being terminated and her aunt, who was going to adopt her, was reconsidering because she says, "I'm bad." RY, the student without parents, responded by saying "Well, stop being bad, LL. Sometimes you just gotta change to get along" (CN5/17).

RA, the one who is responsible for the daily care of her mother's other children, agreed with RY and told LL she "needs to change her behavior" because "there's a lot of discipline in *juvi*" and she will lose all of her freedom. LL responded morosely with, "Maybe I need that. I can't seem to give it to myself." RA laughed and then described to the others how she sits next to LL in class, takes LL's phone away from her, and makes her do her homework (CN5/17). LL's peers clearly had more influence over her than her teachers.

As the school year drew to a close, LL's Circle, as she liked to call it, was also coming to an end. The other freshman girl, lost to the world of boys, had dropped out of school two months earlier to "look for a job;" the cautious and precocious junior was in the early stages of pregnancy with an unpredictable future; TR was accepted at a university nearby; RY was transferring to another school after she moved out of her uncle's home in the summer; and RA's mother was moving and taking RA to another school district. LL would be returning in the fall but as a freshman again. She had failed

all of her classes even though everyone, from the caring principal who saw her potential to the teacher who called her “evil,” began noticing glimmers of improvement in her attitude and behavior towards the end of the year.

When the 2011-2012 academic year began three months later, LL came up to me with one of her endearing smiles and said, “Are we going to have another Circle this year, Ms. Ann.....please?” Sadly, at the time of this writing, this Circle never took place for by mid semester she became involved with the judicial system due to truancy and was sent to an alternative school, which provided more structure.

### Circle of Playfulness (#6)

Probably the best introduction I can give to the Circle of Playfulness—an endearing group of five African-American freshmen girls recommended by the middle school Restorative Practices’ Coordinator as “students who have a lot of potential but could sure use some discipline!”—is the following story. One day TL asked, “Can I get a drink of water, Ms. Ann?” Since the new principal was strictly enforcing an old rule of keeping students in classrooms unless they obtained a rare pass from the teacher, I hesitantly said, “Yes, but please come back as quickly as possible because I don’t have passes for students.” The fountain was only a short distance down the hall. After a few minutes, I checked the hallway but TL was nowhere to be seen. “I wonder where could she have gone?” I muttered to myself out loud, as I walked back into the room, puzzled and somewhat dismayed that she could have disappeared so quickly.

During the tenure of the previous principal who was fired the year before, students were known to do just that—get a pass or sneak out of class, text their friends, and meet them in various parts of the large building for questionable interactions. With the new principal, this was now being reported as a truancy violation even if they had already been marked present. Security guards, teachers and staff were on a determined mission to get this problem under control and I, being a guest, felt obliged to abide by their rules.

In hindsight, quite honestly, I was less concerned about TL getting caught than I was about feeling betrayed since I thought I had built enough trust with them that they would never want to skip out of the Circle. Sometimes I take things too seriously. As time passed and I was becoming more annoyed, the girls continued to sit docilely in the



Circle, looking serious and grim, which was contrary to their usual lively and jovial selves. I even heard someone say, “yeah, this isn’t good....umm... she’s gonna get in trouble....maybe she went to meet .....!” I could not hear the name. Suddenly I noticed a slight smile on one of the girl’s faces, heard some giggles, and then a sudden outburst of laughter as they all looked in the direction of the long heavy mahogany table about ten feet behind me. I made a 180-degree turn and saw TL crouched under the table, laughing hysterically. Feeling surprised and foolish that I had just fallen for the oldest “hide and seek” game played by children on adults, I regained my composure and began laughing with them at me. I am sure I was funny to them. As they eagerly retold the story, TL had crept into the room through an unused side entrance, hid behind some metal file cases and when I went briefly out into the hall, she adeptly slid under the table in full view of the others! They all enjoyed being part of the theatrical performance in which I unknowingly played the key part (CN6/27).

As my notes succinctly record over the year, discipline (that is, not interrupting, listening respectfully, and using the ball when they wanted to speak) was not their strongest quality in the Circles.

The girls were hyper and chatty today (CN6/9).

The girls seemed unfocused, talking over one another (CN6/10).

They were really hyper this afternoon (CN6/12).

Lively group today (CN6/14).

Very lively today and quite impossible to contain their energy (CN6/15).

They all came in happy and giggling (CN6/17).

They giggled, squirmed, chatted, giggled again, and I had to keep getting them back on track! (CN6/27)

Talking, laughing and having so much fun (CN6/28).

Difficult to get them calmed down; they giggle & interrupt (CN6/29).

In addition to their animated, chatty behavior, some of them also played with the sock dolls (placed on the floor in center of Circle), twisting or turning them upside down;

another unconsciously, but consistently sucked her thumb; some slowly and attentively combed their hair; EL polished her nails blue once or twice; TL jumped out of her seat periodically to rid herself of excess energy; and they frequently passed around small bags of artificially-flavored snacks someone had brought to share. The cell phone might have become a problem if I had not explained in the beginning that it is difficult to listen respectfully to each other if they are texting at the same time. If I gently reminded them to “let’s stay on topic and be respectful towards each other” or “let’s listen respectfully since she has the ball,” they usually quieted down, with a few smothered giggles on the side. I found that patience, repetition, a smile and firm kindness were useful skills in this Circle.

With a combined grade point average hovering around a 2 point, there was a clear disconnect between the careers of their dreams and the reality of their current academic standing. While they wanted to be a “lawyer; a language interpreter; a cancer doctor; a veterinarian; and a pediatrician,” they were unable to see the gap between their aspirations and the importance of exerting effort as freshmen (CN6/12).

Math was the subject they were all failing. When I inquired about what they saw as the problem, they each acknowledged one by one, that they did not turn in their homework and they talked to their friends “too much” in class. When I probably had an “oh my” expression on my face—which I try to avoid most of the time—one girl admitted doing part of her homework, “but I don’t finish it, so I don’t turn it in” (CN6/10). The thought of getting partial credit for partial homework, which some teachers were giving to motivate the students, did not cross their minds.

They each reminisced about being better students when they were younger, but now their grades were falling and they could not understand why (CN6/3). The transition between middle school and high school was difficult for them, they said, because there was “too much work, more responsibility and the teachers are boring when they lecture up front.” They thought the “teachers don’t care to help us understand and are just here to get their paychecks” (CN6/9). One time, when we were discussing how to improve the school, I causally asked them what they thought teachers might get upset about with their students. Their list included “*kids being disrespectful; not turning in their homework; talking out of turn; walking around class; coming to class late; and talking too loud.*” (CN6/8). From this insightful list, I realized they were more aware of their teachers’ expectations than I had thought. However, from their perspective as freshmen, high school was supposed to be more fun, “kind of like what we see on TV or in the movies with parties, field trips and the freedom to get out of class when we need to” (CN6/3). I never could figure out which movies or TV programs they were watching.

Since statistics reveal the importance of the freshman year in keeping high school students on track for graduation (Chapman, Laird, & KewalRamani, 2010), and it was clear that three of the five were doing poorly in more than one course, I routinely began asking about their grades during each of the check-in periods. Whenever something positive happened in one of their classes, such as a slightly “improved” grade on an exam, or they reported turning in their homework, I suggested we all clap for them even as they giggled with embarrassment. Eventually, they began clapping on their own—both for themselves and others.

Over the many weeks we spent together, we discussed how conflict, anger and stress can affect their grades; how grades affect their career goals; how boys can be a distraction from their goal to graduate (CN6/14); how their self-esteem is connected to their school performance (CN6/20); and what happens to teens if they get pregnant and become high school “drop outs” (CN6/4). None of them wanted that to happen to them.

By early spring of their freshman year, their grades began to show minor improvement as my Circle notes indicate:

Good news!!! During check-in today, EL started talking about how her grades were much better, and then everyone also said, “Yeah my grades are better too!!!” It was almost like they were competing for attention and showing who was doing better! I asked EL what was different and she said she was doing her homework and trying to listen more. Then TL said she was doing better with her homework because she realized she didn’t want to repeat 9<sup>th</sup> grade. This is the first time I’ve seen them excited about improving their grades. YEAH!!! (CN6/9)

Underlying their academic ennui—sadly present in a number of students in this high school—was a current of creative energy that burst forth unexpectedly one day in a Circle. GE, who suffered from low self-esteem and depression due to a weight issue, suddenly announced that she had written a few poems in their after-school program and she wanted to know if she could share them (CN6/4). Shy and close to changing her mind, the others in their usual lively manner encouraged her to read and offered adulation once she finished. GE’s timid initiative apparently gave permission to three others to share their creative secrets—two announced they also wrote poetry and one, who was worried about flunking her freshman year, had a “novel under way.” I was dumbfounded and inquired whether their teachers knew that they liked to write. They said no.

Inspired by GE, AH brought five of her poems to read in the Circle several months later (CN 6/14) and gave me permission to print her favorite, *One of a Kind*.

## ONE of a KIND

People like you for who you are  
 People care for you because you care for  
 them

People think your cute cuz you are  
 People think about you cuz your on their  
 minds But

People hate on you cuz they're jealous  
 People could care less about you cuz  
 they're selfish

People think your ugly, cuz they are  
 People don't think about you cuz they wish they were you  
 But if you put the Love & Hate together  
 you're.....

## ONE of a KIND

The night after the Circle, I reflected on the untapped creative energy of these students with a particular focus on AH:

She has so much potential but why are her grades so low....unmotivated in school, smart, also focused on her boyfriend, I think. Today, she brought me all of her poems and I thanked her! I wish I could do something more for her. Guess just keep trying to encourage her to get her grades up and keep writing these poems! At least that's productive and creative. (CN6/14)

The gradual improvement in grades continued to the end of the year. No one would have to repeat their freshman year even though a few would have to re-take several courses. BR said she had to get her grades up because her mother was threatening to take her puppy away. Since TL had been "worried that she might have to repeat the year," she had started turning in her homework (CN6/14). GE began

receiving positive feedback from both her math and science teachers and one sent me the following email:

GE has turned a corner in regards to her academic choices. She forgot she was good at school. She recently started to complete all her work in her science class and has now found that she is “good” at science and “understands this stuff” if she completes her work. (Teacher, personal communication, April 6, 2011).

When I shared this compliment with GE, she told me that after talking about their careers in Circle, she realized that if “I don’t do my studies, I can’t become a lawyer” (CN6/14). She explained this further in our end-of-the-year interview.

GE: Remember how we were talking about our future and stuff (*in the Circle*)... It made we wanna start to do my work more and finish my homework because I know that if I wanna be a criminal lawyer then I can’t just sit there and slack all day and talk to my friends.

ANN: So you were slacking before you started the Circle?

GE: Yeah, I was lazy and people, they were saying that freshman year don’t really count and stuff like that, so I’m like, O.K.

ANN: So you thought you could just chill out?

GE: Until I got my report card (*smiling*)

ANN: And then what happened?

GE: It was BAD (*laughing*) I think I got all Ds. That was the first one. This is the second one that we just got and I had an A, 3 Cs and a D+. (IN15, 2011, p. 1)

When I asked GE what inspired her to do better, she replied that in Circle

I learned that I’m not the only one with self-esteem issues or I’m not the only one getting bad grades, or getting talked about and stuff like that. And it’s nice to know that. (IN15, 2011, p. 2)

The Circle of Playfulness continued to meet weekly during their sophomore year with near perfect attendance, their usual chatty, animated behavior, and their deepening

care and support of one another. BR, whose mother threatened to take away her puppy, got all of her grades up to As and Bs. While the others may not become academic stars and will probably continue to struggle, motivation to do better in school has taken root. During a Circle discussion on the pursuit of happiness, I asked each one of them to think deeply about what really makes them feel happy. Situated within the mix of “getting the things I like,” “being with my boyfriend,” and “food,” was “getting good grades in school!” and “doing well on an exam” (CN6/31). I looked at this as progress!

### Circle of Volatility (#7)

The Circle of Volatility began when the two best friends from the disbanded Circle of Surprise, DN and AJ, asked me several months into their sophomore year about forming a new Circle with three other friends – two from the Balkans (one highly restrained and one highly impulsive) and a third from Northern Europe with a temperament somewhere in between. All immigrated to the United States at a very early age, are average or above average students and, because of their fluent English, all help their parents resolve household matters and navigate through the vagaries of daily life. “We really need a place to talk and we miss you!” said DN. Honestly, I missed them too and answered yes.

This endearing, drama-filled Circle can best be described with the following gerunds—loving, squabbling, caring, ignoring, raging, laughing, yelling, crying and hugging—and thus, I named them the Circle of Volatility. Perplexing as it was engaging, dynamic as it was perfunctory, and contentious as it was harmonious, it was certainly never ever boring. Since unpredictability was their defining characteristic, I never knew from week to week what mood to expect and often found myself scrambling for the right words or the right actions to deal with the crisis situation at hand. Initially, my notes reflect the group’s cohesion and familiarity with each other:

I think this group will go well together... they laugh a lot; seem very comfortable with each other (CN7/1). The time went by really quickly. They know and trust each other and seem to get along really well (CN7/2).

By the 3<sup>rd</sup> Circle, they were exchanging stories about their “crushes;” about their parents’ reluctance in letting them go to homecoming or prom; about whether love is a stronger force than fear; and about the most important qualities to look for in a future



partner. At the end of the Circle, suddenly realizing they had spoken frankly in front of “an adult,” one of them commented on her way out, “I can’t believe we are telling you all of this. If I told my Dad, he would slap me! I wish we could have Circles every day! They are so much more interesting than our classes” (CN7/3).

By the 6th meeting, they were embroiled in a full-fledged interpersonal conflict—the first of many—because the parents had discovered a secret cell phone AJ and DA were sharing between the two of them. The other girls were guilty by association. The parents, who were from the same ethnic community, blamed each other’s children, and forbade the girls from seeing or contacting each other after school. They were even told to avoid contact during school, since their fathers had a male “spy” (they thought they knew who), but concluded their fathers had gone too far with that request (CN7/6).

During that emotional two-hour Circle, they focused on their parents’ fears and concerns (going out with Arab boys); discussed misunderstandings that arise from being raised in two different cultures; and reminisced, through tears, about the “good times” they used to have with their parents when they were young and could communicate better with them (CN7/6). Since their parents never learned how to listen “back in the old country,” where they “all yell at each other when they’re mad,” they decided they should model better listening skills at home and stop ignoring them. With tears dried up, their Plan of Action (as they named it) was concocted to get back into their parents’ good graces and “build up trust again, so they’ll be proud of us!” DN left that day saying, “Wow, we were ready to kill each other and now we understand each other better” (CN7/6).

However, the continued stress of angry fathers contacting each other over the cell phone incident turned the 7<sup>th</sup> meeting into an open shouting match between DN, DA and AJ, stretching my conflict resolution skills to their limit. One of the quieter girls of the group, who was trying to calm things down, said their fathers were acting this way because “they’ve all been raised in violence, but we don’t have to behave like that!” After the storm of venting passed and some equilibrium was established, the two best friends, DN and AJ causally yelled, as if nothing had happened, “Bye Mrs. Ann, love you!” on their way out the door to their next class (CN7/7). Honestly, I was relieved when the bell rang.

By the 9<sup>th</sup> meeting, the Plan of Action to “get things straightened out at home,” created during the 6<sup>th</sup> meeting, seemed to be working because I commented in my Circle notes that “they all seem to have much improved relationships with their parents and are happier now” (CN7/9). The 10<sup>th</sup> meeting, however, introduced a new crisis—one girl’s parents found out about her secret Arab ‘crush’ and were threatening all sorts of dire consequences. That Circle, since it was a “crisis,” was spent preparing a “get away” plan for her to stay with another girl’s family (of course, unbeknownst to her parents!) in case the father got excessively angry and “kicked her out of the house!” Fortunately, nothing so drastic occurred and the issue was resolved later that week with grounding and loss of cell phone privileges (CN7/10).

There were brief interludes between the ‘crisis’ Circles, as I silently called them, when we were able to focus on other topics, such as career choices, building self-efficacy, puberty changes, dealing with gossip and rumors, and other school-related problems. (CN9/11; CN7/11; CN7/13; CN7/27). Yet, as my notes reflect, over the weeks and

months, I began to doubt my own effectiveness as the Circle Keeper, and to question the purpose of our weekly meetings:

My feeling is fundamental discouragement. They seem very immature for sophomores and the Circle doesn't seem to serve a higher purpose. I realize that I do have an agenda for the Circles and that is to help the girls mature. Again the two girls are back to sharing a secret phone when just two months ago there was an entire drama about cell phone use behind their parents' back.

I have tried week after week to introduce a topic once we do the check-in, but it is invariably diverted by someone talking and interrupting, usually the three impulsive, animated ones (DA, DN and AJ). Is this a social group that just enjoys getting out of class or is this really doing something for them? Should I be firmer? Is the problem that they are so familiar with each other that the more formal structure with the talking piece simply has broken down? Why has it broken down in this group and not the others?

While I'm not opposed to the girls having fun or acting silly at times, shouldn't this Circle also be about exploring Life's issues on a deeper level? Am I too much *invested in the outcome when instead I should just be observing the process*? I guess, as a former teacher, I realize that I am taking the students out of class and to have it just be a social gathering—if that is what it is—makes me feel guilty. The teachers are trusting that I am doing “something” whatever that “something” may be.

When the girls feel insecure, they make comments such as, “You're coming back next year, aren't you, Mrs. Ann?” or “Do you hate us?” after I firmly intervened in one of their bickering matches. They got visually upset, especially DN, when I mentioned that we only have one more Circle before school ends and that we probably won't be having a Circle in the fall.

I do see how the Circle is an important place for them to be and to share, but I feel unsatisfied. However, as a researcher, I must take myself out of this right now, and just observe what I don't want to occur in other Circles. (CN7/18)

These reflective thoughts reveal the challenges this particular Circle presented for me. It forced me to confront my own personal motives for the Circles; the biases that had arisen while facilitating the Circles; and my own attachment to the relationships that we had built over the many months together, especially with DN and AJ, students from my first Circle. In trying to determine the source of my frustration, as well as the

purpose of the Circle from their perspective, I discovered some of my answers in DA and UM's joint interview at the end of the year.

DA: I don't think any of us would be friends right now if it wasn't for the Circle.

ANN: Really?

UM: Yeah... like they've (*referring to DN, AJ and DA*) been through so much this year and like all of the arguments and stuff....

ANN: Well, what is it about... I mean why does the Circle make you stay together?

DA: I don't know. *It makes you feel safe.* Like you can actually talk about stuff here....It just gives you like an opportunity to go, like, solve things. It's really good...I think the circle *helps us vent!!!!*  
(DA & UM, IN21, 2011, p. 2)

The two best friends, DN and AJ, also mentioned the importance of the Circle as a *place to vent*:

ANN: So why is that important to you?

DN: So you could just like...

AJ: you open up....

DN: Yeah...You open up. You like *get things out of your system.* It feels good (DN & AJ, IN19, 2011, p. 2). Like we can't wait for the peace Circle so we can all talk about our problems (DN & AJ, IN19, 2011, p. 1).

For DA and UM, the venting in the Circle helped them *manage their anger* better.

UM: We're more calmer.

ANN: You're more calmer?

UM: Yeah!

DA: Yeah...way more calmer!

ANN: Can you tell me why? Why are you calmer?

DA: Because it doesn't lead anywhere. If you're gonna go and approach someone with anger, they're gonna approach you with anger back. That's not going to lead to anywhere.

ANN: But what has the Circle...what is the Circle doing for you to make you calmer?

UM: Like we talk about it. Everybody like gives their opinion and yeah...

ANN: So that's part of that venting?

DA: Yeah.

ANN: So the venting helps calm you down? *(They nod yes)* So is that actually connected to anger management? *(They nod yes)* Is that what you are saying?

BOTH: Yeah... yeah...

DA: I lose all of my stress in the Circle. (DA&UM, IN21, 2011, p. 13)

Aside from the Circle being a place to vent and reduce stress levels, AR thought the Circle helped them *change their behavior* for the better.

AR: We're actually way quieter than last year because like we were loud. We would yell out!

ANN: All of you?

AR: Yes, we would not wait for our turn to come *(in class)*. We would just yell out the answer, or like we'd get into an argument, but now we actually try to listen one on one. Like if somebody talks, we try to listen to them to see what they're thinking... (AR, IN23, 2011, p. 3)

For some of the girls, *relationships with their parents also improved*. DA described how the Circle

helped me realize that I'm not always right. Like just hearing myself talk, you know listening to the stuff I'm saying... It's like, you know, I'm not always right, especially like with parents. You know, thinking that they're wrong and now looking back, they're right about a lot of stuff. (DA&UM, IN21, 2011, p. 8)

AJ, whose independent spirit often brought her trouble at home, observed that

it's (*the Circle*) made me calmer. Before I was just like...I would always get mad at my parents for like trying to tell me something, but now I know, since we've been in Circle, that they do it for my better; like for me to have a good life and to be safe and that they do care about me. You can't always think, "OMG they hate me!" They don't hate you. They're doing it, like for your better, and I've learned that in the Circle. (DN&AJ, IN19, 2011, p. 7)

When I asked AJ what we did in the Circle that made her realize that her parents were thinking of her best interests, she said:

By us bringing up our problems and stuff, and like us sitting in the Circle thinking. Like you figure it out yourself that they're doing it for you... not for the neighbors, not for anybody else but for you...for you to be better. Like we figure it out ourselves and by you telling us. (DN&AJ, IN19, 2011, p. 7)

DN, who lived in a single parent home and bore much of the household responsibilities, talked about how her relationship with her father improved after she taught him and her brother how to listen to one another.

DN: Yeah, like when I have a problem with my Dad, I try to like—what we do (*in the Circle*), listen—yeah, I listen to him and I'm always thinking like I learned in the peace Circle, cause we sit like that at home, like at the dinner table and we're talking.....

ANN: So if you had not had the peace Circle you would....

DN: I think I would interrupt him and ...

ANN: Does he notice a difference?

DN: Yeah, he asked me why and I explained it to him. Like no one interrupts anymore, even in my family, since I started doing it. Everyone does it now.

ANN: So what do you do? If someone starts to interrupt, what do you do?

DN: It's like.... "Let him or her talk! Like let them talk! Give them a chance to like explain themselves!" and everyone does and now, cause.... The other day, I tried interrupting my brother and my Dad said, "No, No, No... Don't interrupt him!" (*She's smiling*) And I was happy because like I taught them! (DN&AJ, IN19, 2011, p. 7)

These reflective, discerning and mature interviews compelled me to question for the first time whether my biases had prevented me from seeing that their weekly "bickering" was the only way they knew how to express themselves while they were trying to navigate through the vicissitudes of their teenage years. They had grown up in families who had suffered deeply from the aftermath of war and who were brave enough to begin their lives anew in a foreign country. The Circle, for the children of these courageous parents, was the only place they felt safe enough to be their authentic selves and to explore how to handle their interpersonal conflicts. They needed me—the adult—to guide them and accept them as they are today, without judgment, while they struggled to discover who they want to become tomorrow. Perhaps I had not been patient enough. This Circle, more than any other, forced me to face the profound responsibilities of the role of mentor—someone who is entrusted with the care and education of another—and to recognize the honor that these young women had bestowed upon me. For instance, the following text from one of the girls, sent at the end of the school year, humbled me: "Thank you for everything. You truly a role model and like a mother to me" (Student, personal communication, June 7, 2011).

### **Circle of Resilience (#8)**

Several early winter mornings, I passed ON shuddering in the school's small, unheated anteroom quietly waiting for the 7:30 bell that told the security guards it was time to open the doors to let her and the others into the warm building. What caught my eye was the warm open smile she gave me as the lone female amidst a crowd of rowdy boys all huddled together under their 'hoodies'. During the third or fourth morning of passing through this cluster of students, I asked her if she would help carry a bag up to the Apartment with the intention of getting her away from the teasing boys and bringing her into the warm school building.

As we were walking up the stairs, she said matter-of-factly but with another smile, "You're the Circle lady, aren't you?" I chuckled, thinking how funny it sounded to be called the "Circle lady." In fact, the week before a student told me her friends were asking about that "happy lady" who walks down the hall and smiles (CN4/7). After acknowledging my identity, she asked for a description of what we "do in those Circles." Following my brief explanation (I have learned that teens appreciate succinctness), she quietly uttered, "I want a Circle." And thus, the Circle of Resilience was born along with the list of her six friends and acquaintances (each with their own story of strength) that she eagerly provided that same afternoon.

From the first day we gathered in the Apartment, this group of energetic African-American girls neither lacked for anything to say, nor went through the early stages of shyness that usually blankets the conversations of other first-time Circles. Instead, it felt like pent-up energy exploded when they discovered they were not only allowed, but also encouraged to speak and hear their own voice in a comfortable, inviting space. The



guidelines were theirs except for the few that I gently but firmly enforced—to listen and speak respectfully, to be honest and to remember, “what is said in the Circle stays in the Circle.”

At times, they were lively and animated (my notes sometimes say “wild”) with a lot of “call and responses” (Foster, 2002), or interruptions and interjections of support; other times, one could barely cut through the heaviness of heart that would quickly envelop and pull the group down into a gush of tears (CN8/6). Anger towards the world would burst forth in engaging, detailed narratives about their day, their week or their past, coupled with outbreaks of laughter to mask the depth of that memory or to the jest of the moment that someone spontaneously provided. There were stories of witnessing the tragic deaths of beloved family members; of cutting on legs and arms to release unvented emotions; of the daily struggles, frustrations and fear of living within the confines of poverty (Payne, 2005); and of the neglect by those they loved the most. There were also stories of getting themselves up in the morning, with no food for breakfast and walking alone in the dark to school, afraid; of being the primary caregiver for younger brothers and sisters while absent parents were at work or play; of staying an extra hour after school to pick up enough credits to graduate; of being proud they had made it to the 11<sup>th</sup> grade without getting pregnant like the “rest of my family members;” and of being the first to graduate from high school so “I can have a better life.”

One student would rock back and forth holding one of the sock dolls I had made and placed on the center floor piece each time we met. Others would hold the dolls in their laps, stroking or flopping them around depending upon the amount of energy that needed expending that particular day. More than once, a doll had to be rescued carefully

and gently from the grips of its possessor. Sometimes someone would jump up unexpectedly, walk around the room, come back and sit down without an explanation. No one seemed surprised.

The Circle's dialogic structure was defined by the talking piece—a small squishy ball representing the world—that affirmed their right to speak. For ON it “was like a microphone; like I'm talking here... I've got the mike. It makes me feel like I have the power. I had the world in my palm.” IE added that it not only “let's everybody know that you're the one who's speakin' at the time,” but it also served as a stress reliever because “it was like real stuff, like if you would have issues, like you would just start squeezin' it” (ON & IE, IN29, 2011, pp.14-15). For me, the talking piece not only provided structure to their Circle and empowered the girls to speak, but it also set the standard for respectful listening accorded to each individual while telling her stories.

Deep listening to all of their stories was crucial. Novelist Chimamanda Adichie (2009) claims that if we hear or know only a single story about another person we risk a critical misunderstanding about that person. By identifying a person with a single story, we prevent ourselves from seeing the multidimensionality of that person's humanness and the authentic portrait of her as a complete, rich and vibrant human being. Thus, in spite of hearing stories of betrayal, anger and disappointment, we also heard counter stories of resilience, humor and hopefulness. They were getting themselves to school, sometimes sporadically or late, but they were still getting there. They were “trying” to stay out of trouble even when their initial instincts might urge them otherwise. They were “planning for a future” by making a connection between their high school diploma and that future. They were calling each other when “things got really bad” and they

needed a listening ear. They were going to make it, they said, because they were learning how to be different than they were before.

IY: I have learned that maybe, maybe sometimes, I just need to be more confident. 'Cause like before the Circle, I wasn't confident. I was like a mean-type person.... The person that loved to fight, argue all of the time, but now that I joined the Circle and started talking about my problems, it's like my anger level is so down. And I tested my anger yesterday, so I know my anger has went down.  
(IY, IN28, 2011, p. 4)

ON: Since I've been in the Circle and have all my close friends with me, it makes me more open. I feel free and calm. Like I can talk about it. I don't have to keep it in which will make me more depressed and I'm already diagnosed for depression. Now I don't take medication for it anymore, but you know, I feel more happy.  
(ON&IE, IN29, 2011, p. 5)

EE: It's a stress reliever cause I hold all of my pain in and when somebody messes with me and it makes me real mad, I just let all of it out, even if you didn't do all of the other stuff. I just let it out. Now I feel like if somebody messes with me, I'll just take all of the stuff that you did to me, and I'll tell you about it, instead of like just going off on you and like getting ready to just hit you.  
(EE, IN26, 2011, p. 1)

At times, I found it challenging to navigate emotionally through their sea of stories because it seemed unfathomable that innocent youth could be subjected to their circumstances and yet survive with such candor and good-heartedness. I experienced the gamut of emotions with them, ranging from outrage and despair to empathy, awe and laughter. Yet each story is a story unto itself by and about an individual, and for us to truly connect to that individual, we must also bear witness to what they choose to share. Sometimes bearing witness hurts.

While we all might have been bearing witness at times, the Circle was also about zest, humor and laughter. ON describes this merriment well when she explained in her interview why she liked coming to the Circle:

I'm gonna be honest! I don't like my classes, some of my teachers and some of the people in there and I just like gettin' out of there and comin' here. It's just lettin' everything out in the open to people I trust. Ah.... We have fun. It's fun when we laugh and joke and stuff, run around, it's just crazy. We joke with each other. We talk to each other about certain things that are bothering us. You know we give each other advice and especially what's important, that makes it the best for me, is that it's around the people that I love and care about.

(ON, IN29, 2011, p. 2)

By being around people in the Circle that she cares about and who share their different experiences, EE believes that "it gives you a different point of view" and that it has helped her develop empathy and a better understanding of how others feel. She explained it this way.

Well, the people in my Circle.... Like I knew them since last year, but I didn't really know them. And now that I know them, like some of the stuff that they go through, it's like if somebody they fight, it's like I can picture myself doing it and when I picture myself doing it, I see all of the pain I just put one person through and all of the pain they just put me through, so instead of puttin' myself in more pain.... Just let it go.

(EE, IN26, 2011, p. 2)

Both EE and IY commented on how some of the girls outside of the Circle still wanted to fight or challenge them, but they did not want to get into any more conflicts.

EE: Like most girls, you know, like they want to get into a fight and if you just walk away, they be like, "you so scary..." Yeah, I just be scary then. I just don't care. Like, we gonna fight for nothin'? There's no purpose. You're getting' mad about something so stupid. (EE, IN26, 2011, p. 4)

IY: When it comes to like little females and their little smart comments, usually I say, "what'd you say B (*bitch*)" or whatever, but now I don't say anything. I just let it go. Let it flow.

(IY, IN28, 2011, p. 6)

Both IY and EE also thought they were choosing not to fight because they realized after being in the Circle that people do have different perspectives and one

should not immediately judge or jump to conclusions about how or why someone is behaving in a certain way.

IY: Like I learned that, it's like a lot of people that go through a lot of things, so you shouldn't just judge them by what you see if you don't know what's on the inside. (IY, IN28, 2011, p. 8)

EE: Well, it's a lot easier to understand a person now. I used to just judge you just from what you ...Like if you did something like really stupid in front of me, it must have been a reason. That's what I think now. There gotta be a reason why you're acting like that, or you just didn't have no home training. (EE, IN26, 2011, p. 2)

Trust was a pivotal factor in the Circle's cohesiveness and provided the foundational comfort upon which they could share their stories and ultimately learn from each other. ON, who describes herself as really shy, was surprised by how the ability to trust others allowed her to speak.

Like I can't believe I'm tellin' everybody what's goin' on in my life and what I've been through...I know that they will be able to keep my secret. You know, just hold it for as long as they live and as long as I live, and you know, not tell nobody because me telling you my secret and you keeping it is very important to me... They can tell me anything. I won't tell nobody outside the Circle. I won't tell nobody anyway. I can trust them. We be there for each other. (ON, IN29, 2011, p. 3)

IY, whose mother passed away less than a year before, believed that the trust they built in the Circle was crucial in allowing her to finally open up, especially after,

we had that time when we cried about things. 'Cause I really needed to cry because I haven't cried in so long and you know, after I cried, and then thought about it a lot, prayed a lot, it just really changed.... (IY, IN28, 2011, p. 6).

During the final Circle meeting of the year, I wrote these closing remarks in my journal.

They've devoured the brownies and juice! We've barely gotten beyond the 'checking-in' in this lively, dynamic group because they are so full of stories and news that they can hardly wait to share! In fact, several of them told the person speaking next to them, 'it's my turn now!' after they'd

determined that she had had the ball long enough and they might not get their turn. Ha...so much for respectful listening! But it's the last day and it's over 90 degrees in the room. There's no AC so they've all taken off their shoes and extra layers of shirts, and then they briefly made fun of IE's little breasts, giggling!

When IY, the one who claimed she used to be the *mean-type*, gets the ball, she talks about being upset and hurt that someone was talking about her behind her back and she asks everyone for advice. I'm not sure whether she's asking for advice to go fight the girl, and I begin to sense tightness in the pit of my stomach. But the others energetically tell her not to let that "stupid" girl bother her because she needs to stay focused on finishing school. "Let it go!!! Now!!! It's not worth it," they said.

I sat back observing this engaged interaction (with a sigh of relief!) and knew then that each girl's own resilience and determination for a good life had given the group a gift of collective wisdom that they shared with each other when one of them started to forget (CN8/9).

### **Circle of Choices (#9)**

The Circle of Choices was created in stages. One day, in the fall of 2010, the social science teacher stopped me in the hallway, expressed his concern about a lonely, despondent student, TA, who had witnessed the aftermath of the murder of her step-father a year before. He thought a Circle might provide her support during this grieving period. I gently explained that the Circle is not a therapy group, although it often has therapeutic benefits, and that I was not a counselor, but rather the Circle Keeper. Considering, however, that neither the school nor her mother had resources for counseling, he thought the Circle was the next best option and I agreed to meet with her.

The problem was that she had a limited pool of friends—in fact only two, ER and SH. I found that a Circle with five to six participants is more effective because, within the time frame of the school schedule, it is large enough for dynamic interaction but small enough for personal sharing. The first time we met there were only three girls; the second time, four; and by the third week we had a Circle of five. At each Circle meeting, the collective group thought of one more person they could invite, but with each new girl came one more story of family neglect, academic struggle, and emotional tension. I wondered if it was their common experiences that brought them together since they did not know each other well.

The final configuration of the Circle of Choices consisted of five African-American girls, marginalized in the high school and living on the edge of stress. Just reviewing the list of topics they wanted to discuss during the year, which included “family issues, people at school, people on drugs, home life and death,” indicated the kind of stress they were facing (CN9/3). The two prominent themes piercing through this

Circle were *the desire to make better choices than their parents and the daily upheaval in their lives*. Resiliency kept them afloat and their strong voices of wisdom and strength are peppered throughout the data chapters.

Since conflict had defined much of their lives, I should not have been surprised when tension surfaced at the onset of the Circle's formation between ER and her two friends, TA and SH, the core members of the group (CN9/2). As background information, ER was in another Circle the spring before, which did not carry over into the next academic year because members had graduated or moved away. Missing this "old group of friends," ER came to the Circle of Choices' meetings with an explicit attitude of "I don't care" about this new group, which she radiated through body language and lack of participation. While the other girls engaged in sharing and dialogue, ER slouched in her chair, played with her phone until the girls told her to stop, and passed the talking piece without contributing her voice (CN9/1;CN9/2; CN9/3).

I had grown close to ER during her previous Circle and she was the only girl I knew in this new group. I too was surprised by this defiant behavior and assumed it would pass. My notes from one of the Circles read as follows:

When ER wasn't opening up and made noises as if she was bored, TA suddenly took the talking piece and the leadership role and asked, "Does everyone feel comfortable to speak here? 'Cause we can't have no Circle if we can't talk." Then it went back and forth between SH and ER.... both spoke over one another. SH was trying to tell ER that she loves her, but that if ER wasn't going to fully participate and be open in the Circle, then she (SH) couldn't either. Basically what it boiled down to was that they didn't feel comfortable about talking in front of ER for fear that she would share the information with others on the outside. She didn't understand that it was her silence and attitude that was creating their distrust (CN 9/2).



Since this was an unsustainable situation for building a cohesive Circle, I tried talking privately with ER about what she was feeling in this new group and then later, we exchanged the following text messages:

ANN: Hello ER. I felt sad today to see you upset. I do care a lot about you.

ER: Aww thanks. I just felt like they shouldn't have asked me to be in the Circle if they didn't trust me. Everything was pointless to me.

ANN: Well, I really felt they want you. Will you come back?

ER: Honestly, I don't know. I'm thinking.

ANN: Well remember when we talked about how body language can often communicate?

ER: Yes.

ANN: So do you think your body language might have been misunderstood?

ER: Yes.

ANN: Well maybe they might have thought you didn't care about them when you really do.

ER: TA and SH should know I do. I don't know WN and really don't hang with CA.

ANN: Well sometimes our friends don't know if our behavior shows something else and it is misunderstood.

ER: Right

Ann: Well, let me know if you want to talk about it.:)  
(ER, personal communication, November 18, 2010)

By the fourth Circle, her behavior and attitude had not changed and the group was slowly disintegrating. In retrospect, perhaps I could have tried other conflict resolution tactics, but inexperienced in the role of Circle Keeper, I did not, especially since the

Circle was initially established by and for TA. Instead I privately suggested to ER that she consider leaving the Circle of Choices since she felt she could not contribute, and create a new Circle with other friends. She chose to leave and from that point on the Circle of Choices flourished until the spring when more changes occurred. This complicated situation served as a steep learning curve for me, especially since I was torn between considering ER's needs and wanting to solidify the Circle as soon as possible to work on crucial emotional issues the other girls were bringing up.

The most poignant issue was their anger and disempowerment. For instance, when I asked what happens when they get into an argument, TA said she "just wants to beat someone up" and "doesn't care if she kills." SH "blacks out and wants to kill someone." CA also "blacks out and wants to hit everyone when she is angry." WN "gets so mad and then stays mad and wants to kill someone... like they don't deserve to be on the earth" (CN9/3).

Saddened by these declarations of retribution, emanating from such vulnerable-looking teens, I understood we needed to co-create, as soon as possible, a safe space where they could release these toxic emotions of rage and disappointment. This Circle inspired the idea of making time after "checking-in" for "burning issues" in which the girls could talk about anything they felt was urgent to share. Moving directly into the "topic of the day," without an opportunity to release the emotional tension that had accumulated during the week, would not have been beneficial or effective for any of them.

In many of their Circle meetings, however, we were unable to move beyond the "burning issues," especially since they used that time to vent, ask for advice, or reflect on

why or what was happening in their daily lives. For example, one day TA came in upset because her grandmother who she “didn’t like too much” had been absent for four days and no one knew where she was hiding. Evidently, while high on “crack,” her grandmother had stolen money from her daughter, TA’s aunt. After her aunt “beat her up,” (which “no daughter should do to her mother,” exclaimed TA), she disappeared and TA was worried (CN9/5). At the next meeting, TA mentioned she was back in the house without providing further information (CN9/6).

That same day, SH talked about how her mother had texted her with “I wish you would die so I can spit on your grave. You ain’t worth anything.” Through extensive processing, group care and a hug from everyone, SH concluded defiantly that “my mom is jealous and she doesn’t want me to succeed. She has the problems.... Because I’m movin’ on!” (CN9/5).

On another day, WN came to the Circle, visibly tense and sad, and shared that her father “verbally abuses her,” makes her take care of the seven children in their house and most recently made her pack “all of her clothes except for her school uniforms,” as punishment for her not speaking to his girlfriend who currently lived with them and was expecting a baby. She talked about running away to the south to see her mother because her father had threatened to put her in a girls’ home. I convinced her to see the school social worker before she made any final decisions (CN9/6).

When we did get to the “topic of the day,” our first reflective discussion was on *respect* and what it “looks like” to them. TA claimed respect was “when someone shows they care” and described how I had stopped immediately what I was doing a few days earlier to talk with both TA and SH when they were upset about something. This, she

said, made her “feel respected. You made us feel that everything was going to be alright.” SH thought respect was when someone “treats me like a human being, not like an animal” and WN thought respect was “non judging” and when someone “won’t tell my secrets” (CN9/4). Understanding what it meant to be treated respectfully and to treat others respectfully was core to the development of their emotional literacy skills.

In one Circle, when I asked them to share their personal achievements and dreams, SH exclaimed enthusiastically, “I made it to the grade I’m in!” especially since her brother had dropped out in 9<sup>th</sup> grade; her mother had not finished high school; and her father got his high school diploma while serving time in jail. Two other achievements included “I ain’t killed myself,” as she slowly revealed her covered arms, and “I got a job” because no one in her family had a job and “even though everyone puts her down,” she had some income and they did not (CN9/5).

WN listed “not having a baby by the 10<sup>th</sup> grade like everyone in her dad’s family;” reaching the top of her class in 8<sup>th</sup> grade; winning a dance competition; and “having her first boyfriend.” Achievements for CA included “being able to talk to people, looking them straight in the eye;” and “moving up to 3<sup>rd</sup> grade reading level from 1<sup>st</sup> since last year.” I knew that she was in the special education program but was shocked to realize her reading limitations, especially since her dream to become a midwife required higher education. TA considered her greatest achievements to be “going to church and being the only one in her family going to church;” “not letting people get to her head;” “getting over her fears;” and “opening up more!” (CN9/5)

Another time we discussed how their families dealt with *conflict*. “My family is a conflict!” exclaimed TA. “When I have kids, they will not go through stuff like I’ve

gone through. I want to have a home, a car, college and marriage before I have children!”

SH picked up the sock dolls and began moving them around like puppets. These are my notes from that day:

One doll represented her aunt, another her dad and the third, her grandmother. Then she demonstrated how her dad would hit her aunt and her grandmother would take sides against her dad. And then she said, “It is constantly like that. My daddy always does something stupid!” (CN9/7)

According to CA, the way her family used to deal with conflict was to “lock each other for long times in the trunk of the car,” but added, “Today we love each other.” When I asked whether they wanted to do anything different when they have their own families, SH said she “wants to have a home where they sit down together and have dinner.” She doesn’t want her “kids to see any of what she has seen” (CN9/7).

I share their list of aspirations to be different from their biological family and their personal achievements to illustrate an underlying theme of resilience and desire to make positive changes in their lives. Difficult as it was for them to identify and openly acknowledge their strengths and qualities, over the months they began to comprehend and tap into their own inner wealth of resources. These notes of just one day capture this change in attitude:

As we were about to end the hour, I asked them to say something nice about the person to their right, but TA asked if they could say something nice about each person. I said, of course. So they each went around and described what they liked or admired about each other: “Being a good, loyal friend;” “caring about me;” “really honest and real;” “always know where you stand with TA” were just some of the comments.

I then asked whether SH and WN knew each other before. SH said “no, not really, but now we are like this,” and she showed her two fingers intertwined. All of this positive energy seemed to boost everyone’s morale and they were laughing. In the end, I took great photos of them clowning around and smiling—really smiling. (CN9/5)

At the end of another meeting, which began with tears and stories of frustrations, they were all laughing and I began reflecting on the purpose of the Circle in my notes:

A positive change in their mood was palpable by the end of the hour. Maybe this is all that is needed....just a place for them to come and talk and release some of their pain that builds up. Maybe I don't need to spend so much time worrying about a topic and reflective questions, but instead, just be free and be there to deal with the issues as they arise. (CN9/8)

As we drew closer to the end of the school year, there was upheaval in the girls' lives, which ultimately affected the life of the Circle. TA began missing school as well as the Circle meetings and neither she nor the other girls would tell me why. I sensed she had emotionally shut down in the Circle, and had redirected her energy towards her new boyfriend. They were inseparable. WN attended school and the Circle sporadically until Protective Services arranged for her to be placed with her mother in the south. In the meantime, this very intelligent, beautiful but unhappy girl had failed all of her courses. By the end of the year, only SH and CA were meeting together.

During their senior year, they went their separate ways. TA only wanted to be with her boyfriend; CA wanted to join a new Circle and SH was again left on the margins struggling to make up extra credits she needed for graduation. At the end of their senior year, however, I watched the three of them, CA, TA and SH, proudly walk across the stage to receive their high school diplomas. When they stopped for a hug and congratulations, their words of determination and faith flashed before me, and I felt honored to have been part of their high school education and to watch them achieve one of their dreams!

Each of these stories depicts something unique, something special about the personality or characteristic of the individual Talking Circles and their participants. Even though the teens come from primarily three different cultural backgrounds with diverse home environments and exhibit different academic abilities, something remarkably similar flows through the Circles, transcending their differences; that is, *the power and healing effect of connecting with others*. The next Chapters 4, 5 and 6—the heart of this dissertation—weave the girls’ voices together, across their diversity, to provide a composite overview of experiences, insights and learning within the secure confines of the Talking Circle.

## CHAPTER 4 BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

The Relational-Cultural Theory posits that a central organizing feature of a woman's psychosocial development is her inner sense of connection to others (Miller & Stiver, 1997). Some of the most important connections are with other females—relationships that often emerge during the critical time of adolescence as peer networks begin to expand (Crothers, Field, & Kolbert, 2005; Hossfeld, 2008; La Greca & Harrison, 2005). The Relational Cultural Theory further informs us that when we express ourselves fully and authentically in a friendship, the experience is both growth enhancing and positive (Miller & Stiver, 1997). In fact, researcher Michael Argyle, who has conducted extensive empirical research on happiness, describes positive social relationships as the single most important source of happiness (Argyle, 2001). The ability to care is the foundation of growth-enhancing relationships and, according to Nel Noddings (2002), all people want to be cared for because care is basic to human life (p. 11).

Relational bonding served as the rich substrate upon which the high school Talking Circles, the subject of this research, were grounded and nourished. The next three chapters tell the story, in the girls' own voices, of how growth-fostering friendships strengthened a deeper understanding of their own relational dynamics; enhanced their capacity to care; spawned moments of self-reflection; encouraged the resolution of interpersonal conflicts; and nourished seeds of empathy.

In this chapter, *Building Relationships*, I first detail the three main *structural elements* (the talking piece; reflective inquiry; and the Circle Keeper) that served as the bedrock upon which the relational bonds were built. This provides a backdrop for the introduction of the four primary *relational themes* that subsequently emerged from the



Circles and are described in detail. Chapter 5 centers on how the relational bonding, as well as the girls' emerging awareness of themselves, contributed to the development of their *emotional literacy skills* and *self-efficacy*. In Chapter 6, I present examples of how some of the learned skills and experiences gained in the Talking Circle, self-reported by the girls, translated into real-life experiences and behavior outside of the Circle.

### **Structural Elements Influencing Dynamics of Relationship Building**

The three structural elements which supported relational bonding in the Circle include: a) the *talking piece (ball)* which controlled the flow of conversation and encouraged focused listening; b) *reflective inquiry* which inspired self reflection and a deeper understanding of different and varied perspectives; and c) the *adult Circle Keeper* who maintained the integrity of the Circle process as well as served as a role model for deep listening, respectful behavior and a calm demeanor. Before addressing these three components, however, I remind the reader once again of the inherent, inclusive power of the Circle by the placement of chairs in a circular format around an open, unobstructed center. This interdependent configuration, which has neither a beginning nor an end, is symbolic of power and cooperation *with* rather than power and competition *over*.

#### **Talking piece.**

To support the equality already established by the format itself, a talking piece is used as a means for regulating and slowing the flow of conversation as well as dissuading interruption of this flow. The concept is simple. Only the person holding the talking piece is allowed to speak without interruption, while the others listen without responding.

The talking piece symbolizes truth, respect and understanding. In the Native American traditional Circle, an eagle feather serves as the talking piece, but any object

(for instance, a rock, toy, seashell or high school diploma) meaningful to those holding the Circle is acceptable. We chose a small squishy ball, designed as the world globe, which the groups called their “talking ball” or just the “ball.”

Most traditional Circles pass the talking piece clockwise or to the immediate left of the Circle keeper, following the direction of the sun. However, I found that the girls wanted the option to start from either the left or right depending upon who was more “in the mood” that day to begin the initial “checking-in” process (CN 2/4; CN 3/17; CN 4/13; CN 8/3). I decided their reasoning was legitimate and always maintained that “this was their Circle, and I didn’t care which direction we started as long as they were respectful to each other.” Once each person finished speaking, she passed the ball to the next person until we were back to where we had started. This sequential process of passing the ball continued through the “checking-in” and “burning issues” sections of the Circle. However, when we moved into the reflective inquiry and “topic of the day,” or when we stayed with the “burning issues,” the girls sometimes broke into free flowing dialogue, using the ball periodically as a way to identify who had the right to speak and be listened to.

Initially, I had some trepidation about how the students would adjust to using the talking ball, since theoretically it prevented them from speaking all at once or spontaneously saying what was on their mind at the present moment. However, I identified three primary reasons why they liked using the ball: a) They could hear what each other said when they *took turns to speak*, even during interpersonal conflict; b) They could *listen* to each other and themselves on a deeper level; and c) They could use the ball as a *tool of empowerment*.

### ***Taking turns to speak.***

Many claimed that when they *took turns to speak* they liked not *having to talk over* one another and being able to hear what they each said. “Yeah,” explained UE (Circle of Social Responsibility), “I don’t think I would understand anything anyone would say” without the ball. “It does help ‘cause otherwise it would just be like everyone, ‘no..no.. Let me talk!’.. ‘No. No. No. Let me talk!’” (UE, IN14, 2011, p. 11).

AM (Circle of Congeniality) described the difference between how she felt when everyone talked at once in her honors class and when everyone took their turn to speak in the Circle. In class,

it’s just like hard to understand one person’s question and one person saying the answer. So when we’re in the group (*the Circle*), I realized that when we *take turns* and we hear one story, there’s no miscommunication going on with anyone....and you know the whole entire story. That’s what I like! (AM, IN8, 2011, p. 5)

LA (Circle of Social Responsibility) agreed and said, “the ball helps all of us, you know, *have a turn and we wait for it*” (LA, IN11, 2011, p. 11). Even when I missed one of their Circle meetings due to a miscommunication, they held their own Circle outside our room in the hallway and used a colorful coin purse as their talking piece (CN 4/21).

Waiting for one’s turn to speak, however, had its frustrations. Some students, like CA (Circle of Choices), found the talking piece irritating at times when they were discussing an interesting topic and she had to hold back from speaking because “I don’t got the ball! I can’t say nothin’.” What really bothered her was that sometimes she forgot what she wanted to say (CA, IN13, 2011, p. 4).

Overall, however, *taking turns* to speak seemed to work reasonably well until there was an *interpersonal conflict*, which occurred in several Circles. As LA (Circle of

Social Responsibility) explained, “none of us want to wait ... none of us want to wait to say something” when they are upset (LA, IN11, 2011, p. 11), which happened several times in her Circle (CN4/6; CN4/7).

NE (Circle of Surprise), who was part of several conflicts in her Circle, eventually realized the importance of being able to hear what they each had to say.

Sometimes when I was in conflict, I would hate the fact that we would have the little ball, but then it kind of—like you said—it kind of defined the structure in the Circle. So I thought it was healthy to have it because if it weren't there, we'd all be shouting at each other or talking over each other... It would be such a heated moment. Like without it, I would honestly think that if someone had something to say, I would just automatically respond back, but because I'm not allowed to talk, it kind of just closed me down, like until my turn comes around.

(NE, IN1, 2011, p. 8)

***Encourages listening and paying attention.***

In spite of the frustrations at times, many of them equated the “ball” with the *opportunity to listen and to be listened to*. RI (Circle of Playfulness), a young freshman who struggled in expressing herself, claimed:

Yeah.. ‘cause like the ball thingy. It’s like very organized and, stuff like that, so like when the person has the ball.... like *you gotta listen*. ‘Cause like everyone is supposed to just be quiet. *Listen to the person* that has the ball, so it’s like you know they’re listening and they can hear what you are saying. (RI, IN17, 2011, p. 4)

NA (Circle of Social Responsibility) thought having the ball as part of the Circle process helped her *listen to her own words*:

Yeah, because when you have like the ball, or whatever, you’re just... it’s like yourself... like you’re talking ... And you’re *listening to yourself* talk because it’s so quiet, so peaceful. (NA, IN10, 2011, p. 5)

For NU (Circle of Congeniality), aside from the ball signaling that they had to listen, it also meant that

everyone in the Circle will *pay attention* to you. They're like, 'O.K. It's her time to talk. Let her talk.' And when somebody else talks, let them talk. You know, it just helps like that. You can hear everyone's opinion about that topic. (NU, IN20, 2011, p. 7)

***Tool of empowerment.***

The talking piece also served as an instrument of *empowerment*, which they used to help define themselves in the Circle. According to CI (Circle of Resilience), they handled it "like a microphone. Like I'm talking here... I've got the mike" (ON & CI, IN29, p. 15).

In fact, often in open discussions when there were interruptions or sudden side conversations, I watched them point to the ball and say, "Hey, I've got the ball! It's my turn to speak! Let me speak!" This empowered them to continue with their stories and/or expressing their opinions (CN 5/ 9; CN 8/5). As ON (Circle of Resilience) explained, "it makes me feel like *I have the power*. I have the world in my palm. Not literally....well, kinda literally... 'Cause it's a world, but it's a ball and you know, like, I have the ball. I'm talking" (ON & IE, IN29, 2011, p. 14-15).

The ball, in this case, represented a tool for the respect she felt she deserved and was asking for herself. As described above, the very act of holding the ball implied "holding power"—the power to speak and to be heard with respect. If someone was speaking out of turn or initiating a side conversation, they intuitively knew the implications of my quietly spoken question, "Who's got the ball?" and responded accordingly. Referring to the ball and sometimes reminding them with a more overt question, "Are we being respectful?" preserved the core value of the Circle at times when it was forgotten.

To briefly summarize, the talking piece served as an essential supportive tool that gave everyone “a chance to speak,” helped the group stay “focused on the topic,” encouraged “deeper listening” to both themselves and each other; and served as an empowering tool that gave them confidence and a greater understanding of the meaning of respect.

### **Reflective inquiry.**

The second major structural element contributing to relational bonding in the Circles was *reflective inquiry*. Initially when each Circle formed, I asked the students to suggest a list of subjects they would like to cover during the “topic of the day,” which we would discuss each week unless they had “burning issues” that needed to be shared. The questions I posed during the “topic of the day” were designed to stimulate *self-reflection*, to enhance *communication skills* in both speaking and listening, and to encourage the exchange of ideas that might offer *diverse perspectives*. In other words, provide a space for reflective interpersonal dialogue conducive to the emergence of collective wisdom.

Most of the topics they suggested may be divided into the following four categories: *interpersonal relationships* (love, friendships, problems with boys, parents, family issues); *school* (Facebook drama, gossip and rumors, uniform policy, problems with teachers, classes, and homework); *personal* (future careers, self-esteem issues, anger management, puberty); and *social* (sexual harassment, stereotyping, racism, racial profiling, teen pregnancy, gay rights).

### ***Increases students’ understanding about life and themselves.***

When considering appropriate thought-provoking questions for each of these topics, my primary intent was to stimulate the girls’ thinking on a more profound level. I

observed such depth of thought in a number of students. For instance, when I asked MI (Circle of Surprise) what she had gained from the reflective discussions, she replied that the questions “make me *think about myself and who I am.*” (MI, IN6, 2011, p.2) They “make you think about yourself in ways that you wouldn’t think if you were on your own....*think of things deeper ... on a deeper level.*” (MI, IN6, 2011, p.7) The same was true for NN (Circle of Silence) who claimed the “questions *make me think* about things. Like they just brought an insight in me as a person. Like I got to *know myself better!*” (NN, IN3, 2011, p. 6) IM (Circle of Silence) also thought the questions

help me think. Sometimes even though I don’t mention my problems, just thinking about the questions you say, *helps me think about my problems* when I go home. Yeah, it really helps. (IM, IN4, 2011, p. 8)

ON (Circle of Resilience) described the reflective inquiry as a way of bringing the thoughts “to the front of your brain, like come to your mind, like not stay at the back of your head” (ON & IE, IN29, 2011, p. 15). In other words, the reflective questioning elicited ideas that she and the others may not have known they had, which enabled them to not only gain a deeper “insight into other people’s opinions” (NN, IN3, 2011, p.5) but in to their own as well. This occurred, said TR (Circle of Diversity), even when

“sometimes it’s like we just sit here and don’t know what next to say, whatever.... ‘cause some people think they said it all, but then once you ask our questions, different people can answer it in their different ways.” (TR, IN9, 2011, p. 8)

***Increases students’ understanding about each other.***

During the discussions, when the girls were able to hear each other’s perspectives or responses to the questions, their level of understanding of each other, as unique individuals, deepened. For instance, when I asked TR what she thought was important

about the weekly inquiry, she focused on how much “respect” she had gained for her friends because she got “to know them better” in the Circle. Now, she said,

I know about how they feel—about their future and what they want to do. How they stand in school....Because some people drop out and people that’s pregnant, but nobody in our Circle is, even though people are goin’ through a lot, they still ain’t messed up in the head to drop out. They still try to go on with school. (TR, IN9, 2011, p. 8)

ON (Circle of Resilience) also said the reflective questions helped the girls in her Circle “*get deeper with each other*” and she liked that, at times, they were “just sittin’ there communicating with one another” (ON&IE, IN29, 2011, p. 15). I point out here that being able to reflect on one’s own actions and those of others, as well as getting to know each other on a more profound level are positive forces for developing growth-fostering relationships.

#### **Adult circle keeper.**

The third important structural element is the presence of the Circle Keeper. Of the many diverse roles the adult might serve as Circle Keeper, two are primary: a) *maintaining the integrity* of the Circle process and b) *providing mature, steady support* as the girls explore the vicissitudes of their interpersonal relationships and their own emerging self-awareness.

#### ***Encourages respectful behavior.***

What does maintaining the integrity of the Circle process mean? First and foremost, the Circle must be grounded in the value of respect and will not function in its highest capacity if respect is not upheld among all of its participants. A Circle Keeper *models respect* through his or her demeanor and makes sure that respect is the foundation for all interpersonal interactions that occur within the Circle. The adult Circle Keeper,



said CA (Circle of Choices), “is important because we need somebody that ... like to keep everything together” (CA, IN13, 2011, p. 11). Otherwise, asserted NE (Circle of Surprise),

had we not had you—you were like the ‘*feng shui*’ of it all—I mean if we didn’t, it would kind of be like cursing and disrespect towards each other and, the little earth ball, if wasn’t going around, then all at once, we’d collide heads. So I think it is important to have an adult!  
(NE, IN1, 2011, p. 8)

The adult, continued TR (Circle of Diversity), “makes it way better because if we didn’t have no adult, (*laughing*) I think it’d be crazy, ‘cause people probably would stop somebody else from talking and try to talk when they was talkin,’ so it is better” (TR, IN9, 2011, p. 8).

AM (Circle of Congeniality) agreed that if

a student is doing it, like everyone is going to talk over each other. When you have an adult, you have to be respectful. Like *when you are around teens, you don’t first think about respect*. You think about how you have to be right, but when there’s an adult you think, “oh that disrespectful ... there’s an adult.” That’s not how your parents raised you! They raised you to be respectful; to be honest; to be brave and when you are like around teens, you don’t really often use those qualities in you. You just try to like have a little power, and try to win in conversations.  
(AM, IN8, 2011, p. 11)

***Encourages a deeper level of communication.***

AM also felt that if the adult were not present “we *wouldn’t have deep talk*. We would have talks—not deep talks like about what’s in people’s hearts or let your emotions out” (AM, IN8, 2011, p. 12). In fact, many recognized the value of being able to “share what was in their hearts” and appreciated that an adult was there to ensure that everybody was given “a chance to speak” (IY, IN28, 2011, p. 7), as well as to guide them “back when we was goin’ off topic” (IA, IN27, 2011, p. 7).

***Provides support and guidance.***

Aside from upholding the core values of the Circle and following the established organizational structure of the Circle, the adult plays another relevant role—*supportive guide*. Having an adult in the Circle was important to both YA (Circle of Diversity), “because you *know more than us*. You can help us with the stuff we say. You can help us too, just like everybody else helpin’ each other!” (YA, IN 25, 2011, p. 11) and DN (Circle of Surprise) because

you’re *an older person*... Like usually we’re scared to talk to our parents but when it’s with you, it’s like we trust you, but you’re older than us, so like it’s better than getting advice from younger.... (*She doesn’t continue sentence*). (DN & AJ, IN 19, 2011, p. 2)

UE (Circle of Social Responsibility) thought that

it’s good to hear from a person that’s *been through our age group* and even though sometimes we don’t listen to it, we still know.... like when our parents tell us something ... It is still in the back of our mind. (UE, IN14, 2011, p. 9)

SH (Circle of Choices) also valued an adult Circle Keeper because

like somebody our age, they’d probably tell us the same stuff, like “girl, just fight!!!” You know.... They don’t be understanding. They haven’t been through anything. They can’t tell us... they got no experience. (SH, IN12, 2011, p. 8)

I understood from the students’ comments that having an adult in their Circle was important to them, but what about our vast age differences. Was that an obstacle? “No,” said GE (Circle of Playfulness) “it makes us feel like we have a wiser person” in the Circle. (GE, IN15, 2011, p. 15) LU (Circle of Congeniality) responded with

No, it doesn’t bother me at all. I like that actually. I like that you are older because *you have more knowledge*. You’ve been on this earth more than we have been and you know what’s up and what’s not. And you ... I’m pretty sure you *went through the stuff* we went through so you know how we feel and stuff like that. (LU, IN 20, 2011, p. 9)

For some students, such as MI (Circle of Surprise), it was important to have a *non-parent adult* involved in their lives because

you know that they're gonna help you, not because they're your parents, but *because they care*.. And that's very important because I think it's hard to find a role model and somebody you trust like that to tell things to, 'cause you can't say some things to your parents. (MI, IN6, 2011, p. 3)

IM (Circle of Silence) explained that teens do not always listen to their parents or they get angry or hurt when their parents tell them something

but if it's a non-parent—like there's no reason to be mad. Like whatever they tell you at least you can think about it... with our parents, we just get really mad, you know. “Why can't they just understand?” But with a non parent, it's like, “oh, maybe I should just think about what they said.” (IM, IN4, 2011, p. 11)

In closing, NN (Circle of Silence) observed that these types of Talking Circles with mixed generations could be a bridge for the growing gap she sees developing between teens and adults today.

You have that adult here and then you grow close to them and then you might be able to see that adults—*I think most people think of adults as a different species*—but then I think this will help teens see that, “Oh, they were our age too!” so they know what we're going through. Like they could actually give us some advice. (NN, IN3, 2011, p. 7)

Considering that research (Noddings, 2005; Scales, Roehikepartain, & Benson, 2010) suggests that teens today are missing deep connections with adults, NN might be making an important observation about a way to resolve a cultural and psychological problem that is damaging to both teens and adults.

### **Relational Themes Emerging in the Talking Circles**

After reviewing the role the three structural elements played in promoting relationship building in the Talking Circles, I turn to the four primary relational themes that emerged from my data: a) the girls' joy of being together and building their relationships; b) a sense of safety grounded in trust and confidentiality, not feeling alone and not being judged; c) feeling free to express genuine emotions; and d) the development of empathy through caring for one another and the sharing of personal stories.

#### **First theme: Joy of being together and building friendships.**

*Being happy to be together and deepening their friendships*, which they identified as close relations with each other, was a primary leitmotif permeating the Circle meetings. Expressed in a variety of ways, it was certainly palpable when the girls entered the Circle room from the noisy hallway, chatting animatedly about the momentary event of the day as they dropped their book bags by their chairs or scattered them haphazardly around the room (CN 3/15; CN 4/17; CN 5/14; CN 8/4). While the atmosphere was generally charged with kinetic energy, there were also days when someone's subdued state immediately affected the group's vivacity, quieting their demeanor (CN 4/14). In any mood, however, there was a quality of familiarity and joy shared between them.

#### ***Opportunity to spend time together.***

One of the main reasons for this tangible exuberance was the limited opportunity to spend time together during the week. As AM (Circle of Congeniality) explained, she felt "really good because sometimes I *don't see my friends* together all of the time and

like, when I'm in a Circle, I get to see my friends and I feel really happy and grateful that I have friends like that" (AM, IN8, 2011, p. 1).

AR (Circle of Volatility) agreed that having time together with her close friends in the Circle was important because "we *rarely see each other* in school and some girls don't have the same classes as we do, so we get an hour to talk to each other" (AR, IN23, 2011, p. 3)

IM (Circle of Silence) also said she comes back to the Circle week after week to be with her friends because "we *barely have time*" for "just opening up and telling each other our problems" (IM, IN4, 2011, p. 8).

***Opportunity to deepen relational bonds.***

According to NN (Circle of Silence), the time they spent together in the Circle allowed them to deepen their relationships because they were able to

basically hang out ... We just talk and work on fun things ... so to me, it's just something to look forward to because I know I am growing like *deeper bonds with all of my friends...* and it's something that I'll remember after I graduate. (NN, IN3, 2011, p. 6)

LU (Circle of Congeniality), like NN, also thought relational bonding was a key aspect of her Circle: "What's making it work is the friendship around the whole Circle. How everyone became closer to everyone since we are expressing ourselves to each other.... so it's the *friendship bond*" (LU, IN20, 2011, p. 12).

For TR (Circle of Diversity), who was relatively new to the school, seeing her friends each week made her "just wanna' *get tighter* to each of them. I don't know what they think, but I do like getting closer to each of them. I think the overall goal was really to *develop friendships* with these girls on a *deeper level*" (TR, IN9, 2011, p. 9).

HE (Circle of Congeniality), who came from one of the local charter schools and was also a new student, described her experience in the Circle “as a group, we come together! *We tell each other like our deep thoughts and feelings* and we understand each other. We help each other” (HE, IN5, 2011, p. 5).

Having the opportunity to meet regularly and build this social support was particularly important for HE (Circle of Congeniality), NN (Circle of Silence), LU (Circle of Congeniality), and others who came from traditional South Asian and Middle Eastern families. Rarely allowed to attend after school functions or peer gatherings on weekends, there were limited possibilities for them to see their friends in more causal contexts (CN 3/3, CN 3/5, CN 3/8). In fact, this focused time in Circle allowed them to strengthen the quality of their friendships, and students, such as RH (Circle of Congeniality), who came from South Asia, said she “just felt better” because “the things that we did here, like I really enjoyed it! It just *makes me happy* because we can *talk about stuff* and it doesn’t matter what because they’re my friends” (RH, IN15, 2011, p. 3).

For others, such as UE (Circle of Social Responsibility), deepening the bonds with girls she had known since elementary school was significant because it helped her “learn new things about people that I like....who I’ve always known but never really knew like that” (UE, IN14, 2011, p. 1). As these growth-fostering relationships matured, she and the others learned the value of “*relationships....keeping the right ones* and letting go of the ones that you know just aren’t right” (UE, IN14, 2011, p. 1). Such discerning insight at this critical developmental age shows a higher level of cognitive reasoning as well as an emerging sense of confidence.

***Students' definition of growth-fostering relationships.***

What constituted a “right” relationship for them, I inquired? MI (Circle of Surprise) provided the following list of attributes she designated important in her friendships:

I like friends that don't try to drive me into things that I don't want to do. I like friends that have interests that I do. My friends they're all ... they don't try to get me to do bad things. They give me good advice when I need it and *they're just good people*. I like friends that don't want to use you and *they don't act fake*. (MI, IN6, 2011, p. 1)

IY (Circle of Resilience) thought a “real friend” in a growth-fostering relationship is

someone who is *always there for you* when you're going through problems; someone who doesn't talk about you behind your back if they feel like something is wrong. Or if you're doin' something wrong they will come forward to you and not go around tellin' everybody your business. Someone *who can keep secrets*, you know. (IY, IN28, 2011, p.2)

Observing the high value the girls placed on positive, healthy friendships, I asked NN (Circle of Silence) what she thought were some of the contributing factors that enhanced their relationships in the Circle. Pausing for a moment, she responded thoughtfully with the following observation: “We were doing the same thing together so we had *something to share* and then, *hearing each other's....opinions and how they feel*, and stuff, just made me understand them more and just like everybody more” (NN, IN3, 2011, p. 2).

Smiling, she said that, when she passed them in the hallway during the week, she felt a special “connection because we shared this thing” together (NN, IN3, 2011, p. 2).

To summarize briefly, these few responses, selected from many, highlight several points of interest. The Circle provided a unique opportunity for the girls to spend quality

time together each week during school. This was particularly important since not all of them had the same classes or lunch hours together and most of them—due to family, transportation, time or financial constraints—were unable to meet each other on weekends or evenings. Furthermore, the consistent opportunity to share a common experience not only strengthened their relational bonding, but it also nurtured their awareness of what they valued most in friendships.

**Second theme: Feeling safe with each other.**

A *sense of being safe* and protected in the Circle was a second prominent relational theme emphasized in the self-reports. I identified three fundamental factors creating this sense of safety: a) *trusting* that their secrets would remain confidential; b) knowing they were *not alone* in how they were feeling; and c) knowing they were *not being judged* by the others. This psychological sense of safety was described visually by DI (Circle of Silence) as “a security blanket” that was “warm and friendly” (DI, IN2, 2011, p. 3). The Circle is “like comfortable.... not just like comfortable, comfortable.... but it makes you like *feel* comfortable,” exclaimed DN (Circle of Volatility) (DN & AJ, IN19, 2011, p. 4). For HE (Circle of Congeniality) the Circle was

like a home to us. You know in your home you just *feel comfortable*? Once we come into this room, we just feel comfortable. We have people that we like, *we trust*.... it’s like *a little oval that is protecting us from the rest of the world*. (HE, IN5, 2011, p. 10-11)

Even though we initially started the Circles in the “uninviting” math room, and not the “comfortable” Apartment we were in now, I was surprised to hear that, “it felt the same! The door was closed. No one was coming in. No one was hearing us. We were *safe*” (HE, IN5, 2011, p. 11). The same was true for MI (Circle of Surprise) who was saddened when her Circle disbanded because



it's hard for me to open up about some things and I liked talking about my feelings. Like the Circle gave me an opportunity to say things that I wouldn't have said to other people and it was like a *safe place* when I needed one. (MI, IN6, 2011, p.1)

Meeting in a quiet, secluded place was also important for CA (Circle of Choices), who described the Circle environment this way:

Like your best friends can come to this *quiet place and nobody can listen* to what they say, and like nobody will go out, you know, like nobody will go out and say what you said—like the personal stuff—and you can just talk about everything that you can't talk about to other people. And you know that you can *trust them*. (CA, IN13, 2011, p. 1)

***Being able to trust each other.***

Since the word *trust* came up repeatedly, I understood that having a secure and secluded place to hold the Circle was not the only requirement for feeling safe. Being able to trust each other with their personal stories and being “around the people that I love and care about” (ON & IE, IN29, 2011, p. 2) were other essential components of safety and the well being of the Circle. This corroborates a study, entitled *Feeling Safe: What Girls Say*, commissioned by the Girls Scouts of the United States of America, which revealed that most girls define safety in terms of positive relationships—when they trust the people around them, they feel the most safe and secure (Schoenberg, Riggins, & Salmond, 2003, p. 10).

In fact, a few of the girls revealed privately to me in their end-of-year interviews that in the beginning they had had doubts about the ability to really trust anyone in the Circle. YA (Circle of Diversity) was probably one of the most expressive:

You can't trust nobody in this school, 'cause either they goin' go back runnin' their mouth and then you all goin' get into an argument and start fightin' or it's goin' be like a little rumor... then you ain't goin' tell nobody cause you are goin' think there ain't nobody out here you can trust. That's why I just stayed to myself. (YA, IN25, 2011, p. 3)

After being in the Circle for about a month and observing that what the others said, “didn’t get around,” she thought, “oh, they alright, you can trust them!” and she began feeling more confident in the Circle about revealing her own personal issues (YA, IN25, 2011, p. 3). The same was true for IY (Circle of Resilience), who “was kind of worried, like I don’t know half of these people, so they might tell my business but I realized that after having the Circle and stuff like that, my business wasn’t put out there like that” (IY, IN28, 2011, p. 3).

The trust that they would keep each other’s secrets was primary in both grounding and strengthening their growth-fostering relationships, according to IE (Circle of Resilience):

All of us who was in the Circle, we *kept each other’s secrets*. Like we didn’t run out of here and be like, “Oh.... bla, bla, bla.. this happened to her and all of this other stuff.” We just kept it in and it just made our friendship grow stronger. It didn’t break us apart, or anything. Whatever we said, it only made us stronger. (IE, IN29, 2011, p. 3)

In fact, the knowledge and sense of security that their secrets would be held in confidence allowed NN (Circle of Silence) to “speak more... like give more insight of myself... actually tell what I’m really feeling because I know that whatever I say, isn’t going to go out of the Circle” (NN, IN3, 2011, p. 7).

When I asked both IE and ON (Circle of Resilience), who were being interviewed together, what it meant to them when someone kept their secrets, ON immediately responded:

It shows me I can *trust* them ... I can *trust* them. I can be friends with them a long time. They can tell me anything. I won’t tell nobody outside the Circle. We be there for each other. And you know, like the stuff that we go through...it’s just locked up in them because it won’t ever get out. (ON & IE, IN29, 2011, p. 3)

AR (Circle of Volatility) also thought the knowledge that they would keep each other's secrets was imperative for her to open up:

Like I can talk about my life ... I'm sure they would not go to somebody else and talk about my life. That's one thing I like. Like we keep everything together. If we talk about something, we don't like spread it in the school, saying "Ah, she's like this. Her life is like messed up and stuff like that." That's the thing I like! (AR, IN23, 2011, p. 3)

TR (Circle of Diversity) claimed that the *trust* they built between them "bettered us, all of us" because "everything that we say in the Circle, it never got out" (TR, IN9, 2011, p. 10). I wondered how honoring the core value of trust between them might have "bettered them," and IM (Circle of Silence) poignantly explained that since "kids are not really good at keeping things to themselves," learning how to "keep secrets, others' secrets that are really personal, to yourself instead of telling them," had helped her and the others mature. She continued with:

If somebody tells me something and I just go on telling somebody else and then that person finds out about it, then they are never going to share anything in the Circle. Not because they don't feel comfortable, but for the fact that I'm still in the Circle. Then you'll realize that, "Oh, I just lost a friend for doing that." (IM, IN4, 2011, p. 7)

In fact, according to IM (Circle of Silence), the code of confidentiality was so respected that,

after the Circle, *none of us talk about anything that happened in the Circle.* Well, we understand the fact that we're not supposed to tell others about it because, you never know, maybe if you were talking to a person in the Circle, but then there are people around you all of the time and they can hear.... We try finishing a problem we have in Circle....so once we're outside the Circle, like we won't have anything to say to each other about the Circle. We'll talk about different things, but not about what we talked about in the Circle. (IM, IN4, 2011, p. 12)

The desire to not discuss the content of the Circle outside the Circle suggests an adaptation to their environment and also a way of keeping the Circle special, like a secret room, for themselves.

***Not feeling alone.***

Another component of feeling safe was the realization that *they were not alone*—that others were experiencing similar emotions and going through similar struggles. *Universality*, the feeling of having problems similar to others, is one of the eleven therapeutic factors—actual mechanisms effecting positive change in a person’s behavior—that were identified by psychotherapist Irwin Yalom (1995) in his group work. As AJ (Circle of Volatility) explained,

*to know that you’re not alone and going through your problems alone—that’s like it makes me feel so much better! Like when you’re having a bad day or something bad is happening at home and you come to school and it’s like the day you know you gonna have a peace Circle, it’s like OMG, you feel good! (DN & AJ, IN19, 2011, p. 6)*

The same was true for NE (Circle of Surprise), a student from the Middle East, who when she observed that the girls in her multicultural Circle “had their own problems,” she realized that “I’m *not the only one* and *I don’t stand alone...*” (NE, IN1, 2011, p. 6).

SH (Circle of Choices), who struggles with low self-esteem and loneliness, expressed surprise that the girls in the Circle

*talk about the same things that I feel and it’s just nice to have somebody who understands me. I never knew nobody could understand me. I used to be mad at the world. Like can’t nobody understand me, but when I heard them talk about it..... That’s exactly how I be feelin’!*  
(SH, IN12, 2011, p. 4)

When NU (Circle of Congeniality) observed “that they have *similar problems* as me, I realized that *I’m not the only one*, so it kind of helped me clear my mind....” Why is it important to know that other people have similar problems, I asked?

Because then you know *you are not the only one out there*. There’s other people that are facing the same problem as you and you can always turn to them to solve that problem. The more people you have, the better it is for yourself and your problem. (NU, IN20, 2011, p. 2)

For RH (Circle of Congeniality) learning “that *we have similar lives*. It’s like a self-realization—that *there’s others like me*” (RH, IN15, 2011, p. 4). “Others like me” meant for both HE (Circle of Congeniality) and TA (Circle of Choices) that they had similar interests and problems because they were teenagers. As HE (Circle of Congeniality) explained,

We’re teenage girls. We all of us had our crushes. We all had our hearts broken and everything. Some of us have .... like problems with our parents, so in a way, *we have the same emotions* where *we are all alike*, you know, having similar experiences, like hurt, pain and stuff. (HE, IN5, 2011, p. 1)

TA (Circle of Choices) concluded that “since we’re teen girls, we all like to party, go shopping and rough and play, but then, on the other side, like, on the inside, we all hurt... Like we’ve been hurt in different ways, but *we’re just alike....*” (TA, IN7, 2011, p. 1).

In other words, the Circle, claimed IA (Circle of Choices), was a special place for “modern day teenage girls” who were the same age “*going through the same thing*, in different ways, in different situations....” (IA, IN27, 2011, p. 7). The knowledge that they were similar not only made them feel understood, but it also opened up the opportunity for empathy.

***Not feeling judged.***

A third component of feeling safe was the knowledge that they were not being judged. For instance, several of them talked about the freedom of expressing their thoughts and emotions in a nonjudgmental, listening context, which allowed them:

EL: to just speak what's on our mind and stuff. We don't have to worry about *nobody judging us*, or anything. (EL, IN22, 2011, p. 7)

RA: to express what we really feel without *nobody judging us* or anything, and it helps us ... like it just basically helps us get like a lot of stuff off... or stuff that needs to be said... out without it being a school-wide problem. (RA, IN27, 2011, p. 1)

UE: to express my feelings more... Like I've always been one who just holds it all inside, but when I come here like I know I can just let it go and I *won't be judged* or anything like that. (UE, IN14, 2011, p. 1)

According to AJ (Circle of Volatility), in this type of non-judgmental environment, “you know people are listening. You know that you're around people who care about you and want good for you, and want to help you and that makes you feel *safe for you to open up*” (DN & AJ, IN19, 2011, p. 4).

**Third theme: Being free to express genuine emotions.**

Thus, being able to *openly share their genuine emotions* in a safe, nonjudgmental environment was the third relational theme permeating their self-reports. Interestingly, many of them used somatic terms, such as emotions being “bottled up” or a “weight off their shoulders,” when describing their embodied feelings.

***Releasing “bottled up” emotions.***

The girls told me in our interviews that being able to release these embodied emotions by talking about them “makes you feel better... because if you keep it inside, that's not going to help you at all. Like if you *bottle things up*, it makes it worse, but

when you come to the Circle, you feel like safe and you feel loved” (DN &AJ, IN19, 2011, p.4).

ON: The Circle helped us *uncover a lot of stuff*. You know ... just let it all out so that we can feel better. We don't have to *keep it bottled up* so it makes us all crazy. Knowing that we could trust people with our secrets and that they have our back and, you know, just be there... It helped us like learn more things about each other and come closer. (ON, IN29, 2011, p.2)

LA: I feel stressful when I keep everything *bottled in* and, since I've gotten closer with the girls, I feel like I could go to them and talk to them, and, you know, someone will help me to try to deal with what I am going through. All of the stress goes away when you *talk to somebody* and you have somebody there for you. So it's helped me deal with stress because everybody deals with it in a different way, and I can use their – the other person's strategies— and you know, and see if it works for me too.  
(LA, IN11, 2011, p. 7)

NN: I don't know... I think I changed.... Yeah, I'm positive that I changed because before, I used to be very quiet and then now, I don't like keeping *things bottled in*. So let's say I have a problem, I will just say it straight out and so, I guess that's how I avert a big crisis or a falling out. (NN, IN3, 2011, p. 3)

IM: I really like the Circle 'cause I think in the Circle you can, like instead of *bottling things up*, you can *open up*, and especially with the feeling that it's not going outside the Circle really helps and stuff. In the Circle, if we just open up, we won't be stressed out about things. 'Cause it feels good to share your feelings with others. (IM, IN4, 2011, p. 3)

For GE (Circle of Playfulness), who suffered from being teased about her weight and felt disempowered, the Circle was a lifeline because

when I don't want to talk to my mother or my grandmother or my aunts and uncles and stuff, and cousins—like this is a place that I can share with my friends and they, if something was to happen, then they would understand why. They wouldn't like judge people, and stuff like that... It's a place that you can *get out your feelings* and like, I'm happy to get help like this because before everything was just *bottled in* and I have nowhere to let it out .... (GE, IN15, 2011, p.1)

ER (Circle of Choices), who was involved in fights periodically, claimed that for years she had had a “cocky attitude, like I don’t care about nothin’ attitude,” but,

in the Circle I can express how I feel... I mean I don’t *bottle it all up*, but I sit back and chill...It helped me to *not keep it bottled up* ‘cause I don’t tell nobody nothin’ .... Like nobody, but when we got into the Circle, I did. (ER, IN16, 2011, p. 11).

TA (Circle of Choices), the student who witnessed the aftermath of her step-father’s murder, observed that

when I hold everything in and *keep it bottled up*, eventually the bottle’s gonna bust and I don’t wanna do nothing crazy, so I just come to the Circle and I just let everything out and we *talk about everything* and so ....I don’t feel like a lot of stress like I did when I didn’t have nobody to talk to. (TA, IN7, 2011, p. 1)

“Talking about everything” in the Circle helped both ER and TA self-soothe (Gallop, 2002) whenever their anger was triggered outside the Circle. As TA explained, since being in the Circle she was trying not to take her stress “out on other people.... and I walked away from a lot of situations even though, I didn’t want to, but I just gotta remember to keep going over the steps that I taught myself and just walk away from it” (TA, IN7, 2011, p. 2).

***Getting a “weight off” of their shoulders or chest.***

Another way they described the physical release of their emotions was getting a weight “off their shoulders” or “off their chest.” Several of them introduced these terms when I asked them whether the Circle helped them handle stress.

RI: It does... ah... like if something happened at home, we could talk about it here. And get it all out, stuff like that. Oh, yeah, it’s like the *big weight off your shoulders* when you just talk about it here. (RI, IN17, 2011, p.9)



DA: Like I feel like when I come to Circle and like when I leave, it's like everything is..like *lifted off your shoulders*... You feel like ... it feels good. Like I don't know how to explain it.  
(DA & UM, IN21, 2011, p. 5)

MI: If you want to get something *off your shoulders*, you could just say it right then and there. That's what I like about it.  
(MI, IN6, 2011, p. 6)

AJ: Being able to talk about your problems, "it's like *a weight is lifted off of your shoulder!*" (DN & AJ, IN19, 2011, p. 6)

SH: It's like a peace place. Like it don't be busy. It's like mellow and it makes me get a lot of stuff *off my chest*. Like I can talk about my feelings or stuff that's been bothering me, or like problems and how to stop the problems, and like how to control my anger.  
(SH, IN12, 2011, p. 1)

UE (Circle of Social Responsibility) explained, "because I have that *off of my chest*, I can be more ME instead of being my secrets..." (UE, IN14, 2011, p. 1). That's why she thought the Circle was like "*a gift in the middle of the week*" where she could "just be herself" and "have a break" from all of her problems (UE, IN14, 2011, p. 6).

I was curious about how they felt once they got "things off their chest" in the Circle and NN (Circle of Silence) commented, "I just *feel a release*. Again we may not be serious at times, but then, it's like.... I can't really explain it.... it's just....how can I put it in words.... I just feel better coming out of them" (NN, IN3, 2011, p. 5).

NU (Circle of Congeniality) said it "cleared her mind" and "kept her calm." "I can talk about anything that's on my mind and it helps me throughout the week ...It's like, let's say, I'm stressed and I need something to calm me down and the hour talking, that really *calms me down*" (NU, IN20, 2011, p. 3).

Like NU, once there was this release of emotions, AM (Circle of Congeniality) felt “*calm, relaxed... I feel like it’s going to be such a great day! Every Wednesday I feel like it is so wonderful*” (AM, IN8, 2011, p. 7).

Perhaps ON (Circle of Resilience) provided the most graphic metaphor about the release of emotional tension when she laughingly claimed, “*It’s like a pimple! You just pop it and let it go*” (ON & IE, IN29, 2011, p. 7).

#### **Fourth theme: Cultivating empathy.**

According to the Relational-Cultural Theory, “our ability to be empathic provides the basic foundation of human connection” (Miller & Stiver, 1997, p. 43). Empathy, defined in the theory as “the ability to experience, comprehend, and respond to the inner state of another person,” is a highly complex, interactive process that relies on a high level of psychological development and learning (Surrey, 1991, p. 54). This means that empathy involves both affective *and* cognitive functioning. What stands out in the Relational-Cultural Theory is its emphasis on the *mutuality* of empathic relationships for a woman’s psychological growth and empowerment (Surrey, 1991, p. 166). In other words, a woman’s need for giving and receiving empathy is as important as her need for developing empowering relationships. From Surrey’s (1991) perspective, “The capacity for empathy can be seen as the central organizing concept in women’s relational experience” (p. 53).

Giving and receiving empathy was the fourth relational theme running through the Circles which, based on the data I collected, could be narrowed to two reasons: a) the girls learned to see and respect different perspectives and b) they were able to experience mutually empathic relationships.

***Beginning to see different perspectives.***

A keystone in cultivating empathy and empathic relationships is the ability to *understand and respect* that different people have *different perspectives* (Szalavitz & Perry, 2010). UE (Circle of Social Responsibility) learned in the Circle to value diverse opinions, explaining that “it’s not that I’ve never known that people have different perspectives” but “like sometimes I would just shun it, like ok, that’s who you are ... you stay over there; I’m gonna stay here” (UE, IN14, 2010, p. 7). Yet, she found her horizons expanding after listening to her friends in the Circle offer alternative viewpoints about a particular topic of discussion. This allowed her to be more accepting of those who were different from her, especially in contentious circumstances.

Oh, that’s who you are. That’s interesting... or that’s cool.. you know it’s something that I didn’t know. Something new that I learned...like now I can just like see that person and agree with their perspective, like parts of how they felt, like parts of their perspective of what happened.  
(UE, IN14, 2010, p. 7)

Interestingly, one of UE’s friends, LA (Circle of Social Responsibility), described how she could now look at a situation from three different angles. Before the Circle, she had never thought about other people’s perspectives

‘cause I always just looked from my point of view until, you know, I sat down with all of these girls. They say “Oh, you know, I see it from this side; I see it from that side.” Some of us see it the same way. And I’ve just learned like when I do something, I think of it as in like, how do I feel doing it; how does the other person I’m doing it to feel; and how is everybody else looking at this conflict. Like *I think like in three ways just to see how everything is going to turn out.* (LA, IN11, 2011, p. 5)

Being able to view a situation from another’s perspective increased her level of compassion and empowered her to take a moral stand in circumstances she felt were

unjust. For instance, she described a lunchroom conversation where several girls were gossiping.

I was sitting at the lunch table. There was like the girls; they were talking about this other girl and like I don't know the girl like that, and I'm not close to the girl, but they were talking about her. And I was just like, "No, stop talking about her... I don't want to listen to you guys talk about her. It's like how would you feel if somebody you don't even associate with talks about you? Why are they constantly on your mind? How would you feel?" (LA, IN11, 2011, p. 5)

This strength of confidence to take a moral stand came from her ability to see life from the perspective of another.

When SH (Circle of Choices) began listening to the different experiences and perspectives of her friends in the Circle, she concluded that everyone has a *story* and that this story is usually a cry for help.

When I look at people... I ask myself, I wonder what's their story? '*Cause everybody do got a story!* Yeah, I can tell most of the time when somebody is going through a lot of things. They're normally loud; cry out for attention. Some people are real quiet and they stay to themselves... so all different kinds. They do that because it's *a cry for help!* They be like lonesome and they be wantin' attention, so they just want to be loud. (SH, IN 12, 2011, pp. 2 & 3)

She went on to explain that

normally when you meet somebody, you really don't know like a lot about them. And sometimes you can be judgmental, but then when you know a lot of things, it makes you like sympathize but it also *makes you like care about them* and grow more as a person with them. (SH, IN12, 2011, p.2)

This ability to show compassion to others whose behavior she found disruptive at times is a profound insight from a young woman who herself has struggled socially and been identified by some as one who "acts out."

***Experiencing mutually empathic relationships.***

The Relational Cultural Theory points out that when empathy and concern flow within in a mutual relationship, there is an intense affirmation of the self, giving one a sense of purpose and meaning (Jordan, 1991). I observed the positive impact of such mutually empathic relationships within many of the Circles, but several prime examples stand out. One is the story of CA (Circle of Choices), a junior in high school who suffered from a mild learning disability. During one of the Circles, she shared her embarrassment about the academic challenges she was facing, especially with reading at a lower grade level and sometimes not comprehending what the teachers said in class. One of the girls suddenly piped up with, “Oh, I can’t tell. Like you hide it good” and proceeded to compliment her on other qualities as well (CN 9/5). In our interview, CA explained that the girl’s reaction so startled her that she wondered whether other people like her in the school might also be hiding their disabilities or troubles

and they be sad and then like..... *that’s why most people be in fights.....* because they be like one minute, they be happy, but then inside they be sad, and one person that do one thing and then they get real mad and angry, and like they just did that for no reason, but maybe they were going through some stuff that day but you just couldn’t see it.  
(CA, IN13, 2011, p. 5)

She began looking at some of those students who were “acting out” in a different light because she realized she really did not know

what that person is going through and I *don’t need to just jump to conclusions* and say like, “Oh this person is bad and this person is that” because maybe somebody made them like that, or they’re goin’ through some stuff in their life to make them like that. (CA, IN13, 2011, p. 5)

The empathic response of CA’s friend in the Circle, which spontaneously emerged from their mutually empathic relationship, allowed her to expand her own

awareness and compassion. This, in turn, empowered her to reach out to girls she had once judged and who were often alone in the cafeteria or at school events. Two girls whom she befriended later became part of a new Circle she helped create for the 2011-2012 academic year.

NA (Circle of Social Responsibility) had a similar empowering experience when she was able to share something within her Circle that had been troubling her for years:

It was the first time I opened to a lot of people and it just kind of ... like it helped having people there because whenever I told somebody like what I've been through and stuff like that ... it's been individually and they were just kind of in shock that they didn't have anything to say. And like having this group of girls...like we're crying, and then the next minute we're laughing. It's just like helped me, and they, of course, gave me advice and that helped...it helps your confidence.

(NA, IN10, 2011, p. 6)

In other words, NA's confidence and self-esteem increased when the girls in the Circle authentically related to and affirmed her feelings through their genuine empathic verbal and somatic responses (Surrey, 1991).

Some girls spoke about how their *level of sensitivity* as well as their *ability to care* had increased significantly since they grown closer to each other in the Circle. HE (Circle of Congeniality) explained that

this group helped me like read those people. You know, I can tell when they are going through problems; I can tell when they're like beaming; like when they are really happy. If they're like really sad, then I can be like, "O.K. What's wrong?" Yeah, right... It's like a power.

(HE, IN5, 2011, p.7)

RA (Circle of Diversity) said the Circle "helps me like see what is going on with the people I'm around to like to know, like, what their problems are so that if something is wrong, that I can help them...." (RA, IN27, 2011, p. 2). In other words, the capacity to

understand and respond to their friends' needs ultimately empowered them to become a better friend.

In closing, MI (Circle of Surprise) discovered wisdom about life in her experience of building mutually empathic relationships.

The Circle just made me realize that we all have feelings. We all have problems and it's like *we're all equals when it comes to Life*. It's like nobody is going to be better than you. Maybe it seems like they have more or they do more, but deep inside *we're all the same*.  
(IN6, MI, 2011, pp. 2-3)

In the next chapter, we see how the mutually empathic relationships and the girls' emerging awareness of themselves, contributed to the development of their *emotional literacy skills* and *self-efficacy*.

## CHAPTER 5 DAWNING OF AWARENESS

We know from the Relational Cultural Theory that women and girls flourish cognitively, emotionally, physically and spiritually when they make positive connections with others (Miller, 1976; Miller & Stiver, 1997). For healthy relationships to flourish, however, there must be a certain level of *self-awareness* that recognizes and manages one's own emotional states, as well as acknowledges, monitors and responds appropriately to the emotional states of others. Knowledge of the vicissitudes and vagaries of emotions is key to developing *emotional literacy skills* such as listening, impulse control, anger management, and empathy (Bocchino, 1999; Goleman, 1995; Kessler, 2000; Weare, 2004).

A person's emotional literacy competence strongly influences perceived *self-efficacy*; that is, the belief in one's ability to succeed in particular situations (Bandura, 1994). Self-efficacy determines how we achieve goals, complete tasks and address challenges. For instance, those with a strong sense of self-efficacy will be more inclined to take on tasks if they believe they will succeed and will be able to recover more quickly from setbacks and disappointments if their goals are not met. Bandura (1994) suggests that a "vast amount of social learning occurs among peers" in school because their knowledge and thinking skills are continually being tested both socially and academically. In other words, peer relationships help young people "broaden self-knowledge of their capabilities" (p. 78).

One of my research questions was to understand whether the Circle environment we co-created would be conducive for helping the teens develop emotional literacy competence and for encouraging their self-efficacy. My data indicate that the girls



learned or improved upon three important emotional literacy skills: the capacity to listen; the ability to manage their anger; and a deepening sensitivity towards others. As their skills improved, so did their self-confidence and sense of empowerment.

Yet an essential step in the development of emotional literacy skills and gaining self-efficacy is *self-reflection*—the willingness to honestly examine our core values, purpose and beliefs. Thus, an intention of the Talking Circles was not only to provide an emotionally safe environment in school for developing growth-fostering relationships, as discussed in Chapter 4, but also to create a space where they could examine their inner selves.

In their interviews, AJ (Circle of Volatility), DA (Circle of Volatility), NE (Circle of Surprise) and IA (Circle of Choices) all made reference to the impact of the *self-inquiry process* on their ability to understand their lives and themselves better.

AJ: Talking just about life....it makes you like feel like grown up .. Like you're growing up and you're getting older and it's like you're *understanding things*. (DN & AJ, IN 19, 2011, p. 9)

DA: Like just thinking about the stuff that we talked about ...it's like you *understand things better*.. Like when you hear somebody talking about a situation like, you see ... how you were in that place before and you're like, wow, did I sound like that? (DA & UM, IN21, 2011, p. 3)

NE: I got *a better understanding of myself* and, you know, my inner thoughts and who I really was... (NE, IN1, 2011, p.6)

IA: It made me *reflect on myself*. I can be a better friend and I can be a better person and I can, you know, be better....but do I chose to? That's the question.... What can I do to make myself better at those things? (IA, IN27, 2011, p. 9)

Having a “better understanding” of oneself opens the door to reflection on our own and others’ behavior and responses. For some of the girls, self-inquiry meant taking

the time to reflect on the *importance of their relationships*, as we observed in Chapter 4; for others it meant realizing their own power to *make changes in their lives*. Both are affected by their emotional literacy competence.

### **Evidence of Emotional Literacy Development**

As they sharpened their emotional literacy skills through self-understanding and improving their communication skills, managing their anger and becoming more sensitive to others, many of the girls reported meeting life's challenges and experiences with greater acuity and fortitude.

#### **First Sign: Improved capacity to listen.**

As Bocchino (1999) states, "good listening is a skill that takes rigor and self-control" and is the hallmark of those with high emotional literacy (p. 57). Learning to listen more intentionally and interrupting less were two of the palpable, positive changes the girls noted in their daily interactions with both peers and family.

#### ***Paying more attention when listening.***

For instance, CA (Circle of Choices) described being "a better person" because she learned in the Circle

*how to listen more and like .... have a conversation with somebody without like going off and like disregarding everything they say. ... or like when they start havin' a conversation with me, like 'oh, no I have to go do this.'* (CA, IN13, 2011, p. 2)

She said, before, "I kind of blocked them out a little and then I come back and then I block them out a little cause I'm *not really paying attention* as much".

(CA, IN13, 2011, p. 3).

When I asked both RA (Circle of Diversity) and YA (Circle of Diversity) what they learned about themselves in the Circle, RA realized that when she met people, they

would be talking, but “like yeah, I’m listening, but I’m not *payin’*... *no attention.*” She described how when her friends were sharing personal stories in the Circle, she wondered, “dang did she tell me that... I didn’t know that!” and felt embarrassed. She was now trying to listen more intently to them and to others as well (RA, IN27, 2011, p. 6). YA smiled sheepishly and said that before the Circle, she “*used to listen, but not like that!*” and felt that now she was also trying to be more focused when people were talking to her (YA, IN25, 2011, p. 4).

“I didn’t really listen a lot,” RH (Circle of Congeniality) concluded, “It’s like I can have a friend who can tell me about a problem, but I have this horrible thing where I’m listening and I say, ‘It’s o.k.’ but ...I don’t really listen.” Now since being in the Circle, “it kind of increased my listening ability” (RH, IN15, 2011, p. 8).

Concentrating on what people said without daydreaming was also an issue for AM (Circle of Congeniality), until she discovered

that *I can actually listen...* Like I thought that maybe when my friends talked sometimes I just get carried away and *go away to my little la-la land* and just wonder about certain things...but right now, when I’m in Circle, I realized that I can listen to my friends and then like I can read their faces. Somehow I can read their faces and see if there is something wrong with them. (AM, IN8, 2011, p. 5)

***Controlling impulse to over talk or interrupt.***

Interestingly, LU (Circle of Congeniality) discovered that because there were people actually “listening to her” in the Circle, she no longer had the urge to talk as much outside of the Circle. This was a significant change for her since the year before she “used to get in trouble a lot for talking” in class and she “was loud” in public. Since being in the Circle

I realize, o.k. if I have something on my mind, I can talk to somebody and they'll actually listen. They'll *pay attention to me* and you know, they'll help me get through that issue. Before I used to talk a lot. I used to talk all day, so I don't know if people were listening to me, but now I don't talk about random stuff. *I talk about stuff that are important...* (LU, IN20, 2011, p. 6).

I suggested that by less talking she might be listening more intently to what others were saying. "Yeah," she said, "I'm listening to people because I used to interrupt people a lot and they used to interrupt me because, you know, it's just, it's like that" (LU, IN20, 2011, p. 6).

"Cutting people off" was something that LA (Circle of Social Responsibility) also used to do, especially when she was angry, but since being in the Circle, where "we have to wait until its our turn," she has learned to "let people say what they have to say" and then she speaks. "So it's no more I'm interrupting you and then you're raising your voice and then I'm trying to compete with your voice...when you can say what you have to say, then the way I was thinking changes" (LA, IN11, 2011, p. 8).

IA (from one of the three Circles not described in Chapter 3) also reflected on the fact that she could be a better friend if she stopped interrupting since "some people don't always want my opinion or some of the things I may say may come off stronger!" She concluded she would be more effective if she waited "to hear what the other person has to say... listen... and then vent," if that is what the situation called for (IA, IN 27, 2011, p. 9).

ER (Circle of Choices), a girl who struggled with deep-seated anger and, as she said, was a "hothead snappin'" on people, observed that her relationships improved when she realized that "*talking first gets you in trouble before you listen.*" I asked her how being in the Circle changed her "snappin'" on people, and she said she "learned to sit

back and watch my friends around me” and not “*try and talk all of the time.*” By “sitting back” and observing others, she was able to “get the real inside of them” and began to understand that “some people you would think they’re living good, but they’re not” (ER, IN16, 2011, p. 4).

As RH (Circle of Congeniality) wisely surmised, “*When you’re listening, you can actually know people more*” (NA, IN15, 2011, p. 8).

### **Second Sign: Better management of anger and conflict situations.**

Many of the girls reported that initially, when they did not understand their anger and where it was coming from, they either were involved in aggressive verbal and/or physical *altercations* with the people who offended them, or they *suppressed* their emotions and reacted in a passive aggressive manner. This manifested in ignoring those who offended them and not resolving the issue, or taking their anger out on the wrong person or themselves by engaging in high-risk behavior.

#### ***Acknowledging their anger.***

The first step in changing how we handle conflict is to *acknowledge* our anger and its potential ramifications, such as loss of reasoning, irrational behavior and violence, when not addressed. We discussed in the Circles the sources of and responses to their anger, as well as constructive ways for managing their feelings of hurt and shame, which are often the underlying emotions of anger (CN2/17; CN 3/17; CN4/17; CN5/5; CN6/6; CN7/12; CN8/6). As knowledge and understanding of both themselves and others broadened, some of the girls began to openly face their anger, illustrated by the following insightful musings:

RA: *I have anger management problems. I get mad to where...like I let it build up, build up until I blow and then like being in Circle.... every week I get to let it off .....(RA, IN27, 2011, p. 2)*

YA: I got problems. Like people always say I got anger problems, but I think I don't got anger problems, but then I learned, like *I do got anger problems* .... 'cause I let people get to me and then I get angry or I just get mad. Like if someone, if one person made me mad, I take it out on everybody else.... (YA, IN25, 2011, p.6)

ON: *I do have an anger problem* that I didn't know I had (ON & IE, IN29, 2011, p. 7). I got it from my father who I haven't met. Oh, he used to beat on my mamma and my mamma told me the whole story. (ON & IE, IN29, 2011, p. 12)

LU: *I have an anger problem...* You know ... and this (the Circle) helped me because for an hour, I'd let everything out, so my anger would be out, and I wouldn't have to like stress myself over the anger and stuff like that. (LU, IN20, 2011, p. 3)

### ***Three different ways of expressing their anger.***

After acknowledging their anger, the next step was to become aware of how they *expressed their anger*, which they described in three broad strategies – a) ignoring the problem and holding the emotions within; b) exploding and being verbally and/or physically aggressive; and c) “getting an attitude” which they defined as being rude, not caring, and “talking back” to whoever is the source of their anger.

#### *Ignoring the problem.*

Hiding their emotions and ignoring the problem or the person causing the problem was a common tactical response. For instance, DA (Circle of Volatility), who came from a troubled homeland in the Balkans, talked about the periodic flare-ups she had had with AJ (also from the Balkans) in her Circle. Instead of openly discussing the ongoing tension between them, her anger built up and then she started “*ignoring her* and that's like the worse thing to do...to ignore somebody” (DA & UM, IN21, 2011, p. 12). This

approach, she concluded, proved ineffective since several times during the year, it led to a verbal “blow-up” which only escalated the problem and resulted in more “hard feelings between them” (CN 7/7; CN7/8).

The same was true for NA (Circle of Social Responsibility) who also came from the Balkans. Her conflict with another girl in the Circle escalated after she *avoided* for several weeks talking to her about a misunderstanding between them (CN4/6; CN4/7). Only after openly discussing the conflict in the Circle were the two girls faced with the pain they had caused each other, as well as the impact the conflict was having on the wholeness of the Circle. That experience, NA said, taught her that

you can't just let stuff go. You have to sit down with the person and *talk with them*. .... You know, understand their point of view and stuff like that and I understand that you can't let your ego get in the way of your friends... like apologizing and stuff like that. I kind of just thought, you know... just let it go, or physically, like argue in each other's face and here I learned that you can solve a problem by just sitting alone in a room with nobody there and like give each other respect, give each other like *time to talk* and *apologize* and like get your ego out of the way.  
(NA, IN10, 2011, p. 5-6)

When RH (Circle of Congeniality) was angry at someone, she also

would just *ignore it*. I would never talk before, but now I can actually talk about it.... I didn't know how to talk about it. Before I used to always like flee, like stay away from me! *Ignore the problem and stay away from that person*. Delete them from Facebook!” (RH, IN15, 2011, p. 5)

AM (Circle of Congeniality) has learned now that if she has a friend who is angry, she will

talk to her about it. Before I wasn't like that. If I had a friend who wouldn't talk to me, I would say, o.k. I'm not wanted and so why should I talk to her and *I would just walk away*. Now I realize that I don't want to walk away ... that I want to stay here and solve it (AM, IN8, 2011, p. 7).

MI (Circle of Surprise) wisely concluded that

if I want to resolve a conflict, I *shouldn't hold it in* and I should actually take action because doing nothing about a conflict, it just is going to make it stay there. It's not going to make it go away. And the Circle made me realize that if you want to solve your problems, then you should do it peacefully. You should ask the person what's wrong and try to solve it one on one with somebody (MI, IN6, 2011, p. 4)

*Exploding with anger.*

For some girls, such as CA (Circle of Choices), another way of dealing with anger was to react quickly and aggressively because she used to be “*angry all of the time and fighting a lot*” (CA, IN13, 2011, p. 1). SH (Circle of Choices), a close friend of CA's, described how she would just

*blow up... Like somebody saying ... just whispering or saying my name. I don't even know... like just tedious things, like somebody saying something about me, or “I don't like the way that Reese cup smell you just ate.” Like it's just weird stuff!* (SH, IN12, 2011, p. 1)

IY (Circle of Resilience) claimed she was

like a mean type person ... *the person that loved to fight, argue all of the time*, but now that I joined the Circle and started talking about my problems, like my anger level has went so down. (IY, IN28, 2011, p. 4)

YA (Circle of Diversity) described her anger sometimes being misplaced and “taking it out” on the wrong person.

Like that person can make me mad. Instead of me taking it out on them, I just won't say nothing and then when the next person say something to me that I don't like.... then *I took it out on them* or whatever. (YA, IN25, 2011, p. 6)

Since being in the Circle, however,

*I don't really let nobody make me angry* no more like that .. I just keep it movin! Yeah.. cause like my mamma used to say like, if you keep your anger in you or whatever, it's gonna build up and then if you fight somebody or whatever, you will end up killing somebody and a lot of



other stuff. So then I guess ever since then I been able to get it out, no *nothin' be stormin'* me no more! (YA, IN25, 2011, p. 7)

TR (Circle of Diversity), the one who exhibited strong leadership qualities in her Circle, claimed that in

some situations it's like *I would have blew up so bad*, but then once us goin' into the Circle like....in the middle of the day it can calm me down.... It made it real better about my little attitude. *I do have a little attitude* and I think everybody have a little attitude so.... (TR, IN9, 2011, p. 6)

*Having an attitude.*

A third way they expressed their anger or irritation towards someone was, '*having an attitude*,' which I asked freshman EL (Circle of Playfulness) to define. It is "like the way somebody acts. Sometimes they can be rude." I pressed her for more specifics and she said, "like won't talk to you or look at you the wrong way." I asked if rolling their eyes and kind of tilting their heads to the side (gestures I sometimes observed between girls when they were upset) were part of the 'attitude' antics and she smiled, nodding yes (EL, IN22, 2011, p. 2-3). I asked her to describe her attitude and she said,

Like I get mad quick. And I can get loud. I probably say some stuff or do something that I regret.....I've got like a smart mouth. Like *I'll say smart remarks back*, but I've gotta slow down on that. (EL, IN22, 2011, p. 2 & 6).

The Circle, she claimed, helped her understand that "like it ain't no good cause out of it. Like no good outcome out of it. We can be a better way of handling it" (EL, IN22, 2011, p. 2). Her biggest attitude change came in her behavior towards her mother who said, "she proud of me for not talking back to her and stuff" (EL, IN22, 2011, p. 6).

RA (Circle of Diversity), who missed her absent father and had anger issues with her mother, shared that her aunt helps her with her attitude when she gets upset.

If something wrong, I can just call her and be like, ‘auntie’ and talk to her about anything, ‘cause she like, ‘RA, your *attitude!* You gotta learn how to put it up just for a minute. When you at school, at least put it up. When you come home, oh, o.k. let it out on anybody you want to. Just don’t get in trouble!’ (RA, IN27, 2011, p. 6)

She claimed her mother noticed a change in her attitude on the days she had Circle and detailed the following dialogue that occurred between them one afternoon after school.

Like the day I have Circle, if something was wrong, and I let it out... my mamma be like, when I go home, “What’s wrong with you?”

“Like nothin’.”

“Like you happy! Like you normally come home from school mad!”

“Like because!” and she like, “because what?”

“Because I talked to somebody!”

She was like “that seem the only way you let your anger out. Like you talk to people and I don’t even know who you be talkin’ to! O.K. I knows you and this lady, but who are the other people you talkin’ to?”

(RA, IN27, 2011, p. 5)

RA explained that her mother knew about the Circle but that she did not know who her friends were at school or whom she was “talkin’ to.”

All in all, TR (Circle of Diversity) concluded that the Circle “bettered” them “‘cause... like I say, all of us had different *attitudes* so then we can calm our attitude with the other person. Like we know how our attitude is so we just try to work on it” (TR, IN9, 2011, p. 10).

### ***Changing behavior when angry with family members.***

Once becoming aware of their ability to manage their anger, some girls spoke about trying to change their behavior at home to improve relationships with family members. For instance, TA (Circle of Choices) described how recently she was trying to reduce ongoing tension with her mother.

Like my mamma...No child should hit their mamma, like or argue with them even if your parent is wrong, so I learned how to like *stop saying smart comments* back to her, *look at her* when she talkin' to me and even if she is wrong, *don't say nothin' back* ... just say yes or no or o.k. Everything should be o.k. from there. (TA, IN7, 2011, p. 4)

UE (Circle of Social Responsibility) claimed that after being in the Circle she was trying to be “more verbal,” and no longer “shutting down and going to her room” when she was upset at home. She felt more “comfortable actually going to them (her parents) and *talking to them about*” whatever was bothering her. In fact, she observed that since opening up and expressing her feelings without getting so angry, she and her mother were growing closer. This is important “’cause like I think every girl needs their mom during high school years!” (UE, IN14, 2001, p. 4)

SH (Circle of Choices), the troubled but insightful student who was being raised by her grandmother,

learned to shut my mouth! Like if somebody say something to me, I do not always gotta say something back. I can walk away. It'll be times when my grandma... normally, my grandma say stuff to me...and I'm just like “ahh....atth...” and I just snap, but I don't snap like I used to snap and be disrespectful to her... But I *do like say my little things back*, but every since like I've been in the Circle, I stop and just think about it. *Like if I say this, what is it really gonna change?* It's not gonna change the way she feels. I can't change the way a person feels, so I'm just gonna be quiet! (SH, IN12, 2011, p. 6)

LU (Circle of Congeniality) used to “slap” her siblings whenever they annoyed her, but she “barely argues with them now.” In fact, she said proudly, “I don't let my little brothers or sisters or anyone get to me. Like if they say something that probably annoys me, I'll just ignore them and walk away, and just then maybe later on, if they talk to me, I'll talk or I'll forget about what happened” (LU, IN20, 2011, p. 4). Since the Circle helped her open up about “her anger issues and stress,” she has a better

relationship with both her siblings and her parents and she feels like she “can talk to them about anything!” (LU, IN20, 2011, p. 5).

AR (Circle of Volatility), a student from the Eurasian region whose father is strict, “older and very religious,” learned that the only way to improve the explosive environment at home was by “just ignoring” and not reacting to everything her father said, especially when he yelled or “put her down” in front of her friends. Feeling more empowered to challenge his negative patriarchal assumptions about her, even though “he thinks he’s the strongest,” she discovered a different way of “handling her angry feelings” and stopped blaming herself for everything,

Even though I didn’t do something wrong, I would still blame it on me. It would be inside of me, so I wouldn’t... I couldn’t be able to like let my feelings go on him, and say, “No, you are wrong. You are doing this wrong. You’re always like blaming everything on me!” ... So like I just ignore him now. (AR, IN23, 2011, p. 4)

Each of these girls, by realizing they do not have to be controlled by their emotions, discovered ways to improve relationships at home and create a more harmonious environment in which they could live.

***Staying away from conflict with peers.***

Other girls described how they were staying away from conflict with peers even if they were offended or irritated. For instance, YA (Circle of Diversity) “used to let people get to” her, but now she “just *don’t let nobody get to*” her. She “just minds her own business and doesn’t worry about nobody else” (YA, IN25, 2011, p. 1). She admitted that she used to get involved in conflicts on Facebook because the “people I write a status, they get mad ‘cause I be talking about somebody or whatever.” I asked her to explain these types of interpersonal conflicts on Facebook in more detail. She said, for instance,

I be talkin' like about a boy and then they'll get mad because I'm talkin' about them and stuff and then they want to argue, but it ain't no sense going on the internet and arguing if we go to the same school, so then I just like I'm not like goin' let them get to me. It's not worth it. I used to just get in trouble and stuff, a lot ... like a smart mouth and everything, but I just kind of ... it' ain't even worth commenting. I just come to school now and do what I gotta do.... (YA, IN25, 2011, p. 4)

She has since deleted her Facebook page to avoid these types of cyber conflicts. Aware of her struggle with impulse control and deep-seated anger, I asked what she learned in the Circle to do if someone says something that upsets her.

Well, that *you should walk away*. But sometimes you can't always walk away, but you should just *be the bigger person to try to walk away* or whatever, so you won't get in trouble or whatever. (YA, IN25, 2011, p. 2)

ER (Circle of Choices), the girl who described herself as someone who was always “snappin” and a “hothead,” claimed that the Circle

learned me how to deal with people, like in general. Like people that don't like me or try to get something started, *I just brush off*.... I mean if you come and talk to me now, you'll see that I've changed! I don't deal with people... *I walk away* or at least try to talk it out .....

(ER, IN16, 2011, p. 8)

When I asked TR (Circle of Diversity), a leader among her friends, if she had realized anything about dealing with conflict by being in the Circle, she said, “We learned like if we got a problem with somebody then we all make a Circle and then we talk ‘like don't get mad’... It's just like a little squeeze.” She explained that a “little squeeze” was a cheerleading term they used in her other high school which meant, that “we all tell like how we felt about one another and how can we all get better at the situation” (TR, IN9, 2011, p. 4).

She then proceeded to tell me about a recent Circle she organized in the lunchroom to prevent a physical fight between several of her friends (described in

Chapter 6). I inquired whether she was pleased to have acquired these new skills in helping herself and others handle conflict situations and she responded, “Yeah, because *it can better my life*. Like I can deal with problems more. I can also be friendly to other people and express my feelings and see how they would express their feelings” (TR, IN9, 2011, p. 5-6).

When I asked IY (Circle of Resilience), the girl who lost her mother, whether she learned anything about dealing with conflict, she began describing a potential conflict situation with her ex-boyfriend that had happened the day before.

Like we used to go out and I guess after we went out and stuff like that, he just said like, “She a hoe; She this and that....She a runner!” and I’m like, “What is wrong with you? What are you talkin’ about?” And he like, “Yeah I heard it; the boys at school,” and I said, “Hold up! I haven’t had sex with nobody in this school; haven’t went out with nobody in this school but you, so what are you sayin’?” And then he just started saying dumb stuff and *I just walked away...*

I asked what she would have done before being in the Circle.

I would have called up my boyfriend and my boyfriend would have handled it in a very violent way, ‘cause he’s a violent person. And I didn’t want... I wouldn’t have wanted nothin’ to happen to that person or my boyfriend. (IY, IN28, 2011, p. 6)

She also explained how she had begun to react differently towards some of the girls at school who were talking about her behind her back.

When it comes to like little females and their little smart comments, usually I say, like, “what’d you say B?” or whatever, but now I don’t say anything. I just let it go ... let it flow.... (IY, IN 28, 2011, p. 6)

Having the strength to ignore the cruel side comments of the other girls or the insulting remarks of her former boyfriend made her feel like she was maturing, she reflected.

The astute student, LU (Circle of Congeniality), summarized what many of the girls concluded about working with their emotions and their anger.

I realized the change is for me! It's not for anyone else. If I change, I know it's an improvement and I realized that if I keep doing stuff I did before, I'm not going to get anywhere in life and it's gonna probably stop me—like my anger issues! It can probably stop me if I ever have a job. I get mad over another employee...it can probably cause me to lose my job, so I was like, o.k. *I have to change that...* and *the earlier you change it, the better it is.* (LU, IN20, 2011, p.6)

The insight that the “change is for me!” and that the “earlier you change it, the better it is” shows both a high level of *maturity* as she identifies potential consequences, and *recognition* that only she can make this change and must have the determination to do so.

### **Third Sign: Becoming more sensitive to others.**

During many of the Circles, there were spontaneous instances of expressed empathy and caring, ranging from impulsive hugs and kind words for those in distress to uncompromising support and encouragement for those who were confused, needing advice or simply wanting to feel connected to the others (CN2/9;CN3/14;CN4/5; CN4/14; CN4/15; CN6/13; CN6/19; CN7/14). The private interviews, however, revealed another layer of deepening sensitivity that was not overtly present during the Circle discussions; that is, their burgeoning awareness of the harmful effects of *gossiping* and *being judgmental* of others.

### ***Letting go of gossiping.***

Neuropsychiatrist Louann Brizendine (2006) writes in *The Female Brain* that girls “trade secrets and gossiping to create connection and intimacy with their female peers” and to “ease the ups and downs and stresses of life” (p. 36). Sharing secrets about themselves was a positive aspect of the Circle experience, especially since the code of confidentiality was held in highest regard. However, some of the problematic and painful

issues the girls brought to the Circle were their reactions to negative gossiping (such as snide comments about their appearance or a boyfriend), rumor spreading, or “backstabbing” that occurred on Facebook or in person (CN5/14; CN6/9;CN6/14;CN7/4; CN7/5;CN8/6). GE (Circle of Playfulness) thought those engaged in insults and “backstabbing” on Facebook showed “liquid courage,” or “courage that like don’t last very long,” because they never have the nerve to say those things to a person’s face (GE, IN15, 2011, p. 11).

Gossiping and backstabbing often led to school “drama” which, according to TA (Circle of Choices), manifested in “fights, arguments... just a lot of plain arguing” (TA, IN7, 2011, p. 10). IM (Circle of Silence) explained that the “teenage drama” or “friend drama” is worse in high school because “sometimes it ends up in fights or in like really big disagreements and sometimes it can just divide you into two groups of friends” (IM, IN4, 2011, p. 10).

The conflicts mainly occurred, according to RI (Circle of Playfulness), “because like girls.... girls fight over crazy things, like boys! That is a dumb reason to fight over something! And stuff, like about he says-she says stuff... that’s a dumb reason too” (RI, IN17, 2011, p. 8). NN (Circle of Silence), the quiet reserved girl from South Asia, agreed. “Basically it’s jealousy.... Like I like this boy, how could you? That doesn’t necessarily happen in my group, but I’ve seen it happen” (NN, IN3, 2011, p. 3). Out of jealousy, rumors are often started.

Sometimes the drama began when a girl thought she was helping a friend by telling her what others were saying about her. Some of the girls in the Circle, however,



realized this often made the situation worse. As IA (from one of three Circles not described in Chapter 3) said,

I mean like when I hear ...when people tell me stuff about people, like..... by me being their friend or something, I say it. Then I had to think about it. *Like certain stuff you can say, but certain stuff you have to keep to yourself.* (IA, IN27, 2011, p. 9)

CA (Circle of Choices) also thought some of the more fractious drama escalated because no one took responsibility for his or her part in the “he said-she said” situation.

They’re childish. They talk like behind people’s back and then when that gets to them, they just like, they look confused, like they didn’t never say nothin’ instead of like standin’ up for what they did ... And like sayin’ sorry... at least something. (CA, IN13, 2011, p. 8)

She thought the work we did in the Circle changed her way of thinking about gossiping because now she stands up to her friends outside of the Circle and tells them “don’t talk about her” whenever they start making critical or judgmental comments about someone. She explained, however, that there are times when “I just gotta keep my mouth closed ‘cause I don’t like that person” they are talking about and “if I say something, it’s gonna be mean, so I just don’t say nothin’ at all” (CA, IN13, 2011, p. 8). When I pressed her to explain why she wanted to stop gossiping, she reflected a moment and quietly said,

maybe because their hair is like that and their clothes is like that *because they don’t have no money...* I don’t know... *I just don’t like talking about people like that no more.* ‘Cause like ... cause I don’t want nobody talkin’ about me like that! (CA, IN13, 2011, p. 8-9)

RI (Circle of Playfulness), a young freshman, claimed she “knew from the beginning that gossiping was bad” and “wouldn’t no one want anyone to gossip about them.” Yet only after she saw the deep pain it caused one of the girls in her Circle did she realize that one “shouldn’t do it...like I guess the Circle has showed *how bad gossiping is...* like more than what I saw before” (RI, IN17, 2011, p. 7). GE (Circle of

Playfulness) recognized that she “shouldn’t follow other people... like if I see someone else like laughing at another girl, that be wrong to join in because *how does that girl feel*” (GE, IN15, 2011, p. 3).

The choice to be discerning about what to say to a friend to avoid spreading a rumor; the acknowledgment that someone might “look a certain way” because they are poor; the connection to the pain of a friend suffering from the effects of gossiping; and being aware of how another might feel if gossiped about are all aspects of the empathic prism and the burgeoning capacity to care on a much deeper and more mature level.

***Practicing non-judgment.***

Being critical of others is a characteristic many of us struggle with on a daily basis and the girls were no different. Yet, the girls’ budding awareness of their own judgmental attitudes about others provided further evidence of their expanding capacity for empathy. The opportunity to engage at a more authentic level with other girls who sometimes differed socially, ethnically, or academically from themselves, or who presented another viewpoint, forced them to confront their own preconceived misconceptions about people.

For instance, one of the first observations DI (Circle of Silence) said she made about herself in the Circle was that she needed to be more open-minded about others, and that “*you shouldn’t judge people on first impression and what you hear about someone*” (DI, IN2, 2011, p. 6). Another student, NA (Circle of Social Responsibility) mused,

Yeah, I think a few months ago I was really, really judgmental and lately I’ve been trying to change that because I learned from Circle that you *can’t just look at a person and judge*. Like I know a lot of my friends...actually it wasn’t even just me... we just looked at a person and, you know, judged them, like from the beginning. And I never really got down to know the person like these girls. (NA, IN10, 2011, p. 3)

Interestingly, it was the opportunity to get to know NA better in the Circle that changed LA's (Circle of Social Responsibility) attitude about judging others. As she explained,

I used to be very judgmental and then with NA—I always thought she was stuck up. And then through the Circle, I've seen, 'oh, NA's been through a lot!' There is a reason why there's a wall right in front of her and it's like ..... *I can't look at someone and 'judge a book by its cover.'* *There's a story behind everybody* and why they act a certain way. You have to talk to someone to know who they are. (LA, IN11, 2011, p. 5)

ER (Circle of Choices) also concluded that

you can't *judge a person by the outside*. Like you can't.... you'll think a person is living a happy life and the best life and that's what you wanna be, but in the end, that's the complete opposite. Like just because from the clothes they wear, you think they living good, but they could be with their lights out, or nothing to eat... You never know. So *you can't judge nobody by their appearance*. (ER, IN16, 2011, p. 2)

Many people, suggested IY (Circle of Resilience), "go through a lot of things, so you shouldn't just judge them by what you see *if you don't know what's on the inside.*"

To illustrate her point, she told the story of a girl she met outside of the Circle who had

been through so much. Like if you look at her, you wouldn't think she'd been through..... like she's been raped. She's been beaten'. She's in an abusive relationship. And she's like only 17, and she has two kids—not by choice – but by force. And if you look at her, you wouldn't think that she went through that, and like my cousins and them used to always talk about her and stuff, but they really knew nothin' about her. When I got to know her, she told me those things. I really respected her and it *changed my whole perspective of her*. (IY, IN28, 2011, p. 7)

Since CA (Circle of Choices) had a similar experience with an acquaintance, she too was trying to stop judging others

because I don't know *what that person is going through*, and I don't need to just jump to conclusions and say like, 'oh this person is bad and this person is that,' because maybe somebody made them like that, or they're goin' through some stuff in their life to make them like that. (CA, IN13, 2011, p. 5)

In fact, SH (Circle of Choices) realized that

normally when you meet somebody, you *really don't know like a lot about them*. And sometimes you can be judgmental, but then when you know a lot of things it makes you like sympathize, but it also makes you like care about them and grow more as a person with them. (SH, IN12, 2011, p. 2)

Realizing that people have reasons for the way they behave, which we have no way of knowing, inspired HE (Circle of Congeniality) to greater compassion and acceptance of another's foibles.

*It's made me like not judge people*. I guess if I see someone like acting up, instead of saying "Oh, my gosh, they're just so ignorant!" or "Why are you doing something so idiotic?" I'll just sit there and think, "Did you have a bad day?" "Let's talk about it." Yeah, like *I'm more understanding*. (HE, IN5, 2011, p. 6)

EE (Circle of Resilience) also found that after being in the Circle

it's a lot *easier to understand* a person now. I used to just judge you, just from what you ... like if you, like, did something like really stupid in front of me, it must have been a reason ... That's what I think now. *There gotta be a reason why you're acting like that* or you just didn't have no home training. (EE, IN26, 2011, p.2)

GE (Circle of Playfulness) described how she had harshly judged her best friend who was dating a boy GE thought was not good for her. She told her, "That's wrong. You shouldn't do that. He's a bad person. He has a bad reputation!" However, when GE listened to her friend's perspective of the situation, "like why she felt that way" about him, she learned that "everyone has their own opinion and that *there is a reason for every action in their life*." This experience, she said, taught her to be less judgmental and more understanding of others (GE, IN15, 2011, p. 4).

Overall, the budding awareness that people have different perspectives, and that we often “don’t know what’s on the inside,” inspired the girls to be more compassionate and thoughtful of others. This is the foundation of empathy and caring.

### **Evidence of Self-Efficacy**

People with high self-efficacy, claims Bandura (1994), believe they “exercise influence over the events that affect their lives” (p. 71). One of the most rewarding aspects of the Circle work was watching the teens begin to believe in their own power to address some of life’s challenges and have an effect on the outcome.

#### **First sign: Gaining confidence.**

Becoming more confident and comfortable with themselves was one of the first signs that I observed. For instance, ON (Circle of Resilience) described how she “used to cry and get upset” when people “talked about” her or made nasty comments about her being “fat,” but “now that I’m in the Circle *I’m elevating,*” she exclaimed proudly (ON & IE, IN29, 2011, p. 13). “I was always like a marshmallow. I was just soft! Like you could just step on me,” but now she feels “stronger” when faced with other people’s opinions or hurtful comments about her (ON & IE, IN29, 2011, p. 14).

TA (Circle of Choices), who also suffered from low self-esteem that was aggravated by challenging home circumstances, indicated she was “*feelin’ a lot of confidence* and ready to continue with her day” after each Circle. “And even if we have our breakdown moments where we cry and stuff, I always leave happy ‘cause I know that once I leave, I won’t let nobody, *nobody will be able to bring my day down*” (TA, IN7, 2011, p. 4).

SH (Circle of Choices), whose low self-esteem periodically manifested through fighting, verbal outbursts and school suspensions, acknowledged that she was becoming

strong because I go through the things that I go through. Like sometimes I'll like doubt myself, but *I really am strong* cause I always get over it eventually. And I've learned that *we all got a future and the things we do now gonna, like effect our future and change our future, so if we grow, then our future will turn out better.* (SH, IN12, 2011, p. 5)

When I asked what we talked about in the Circle that led her to these insights, she responded,

when you had told us that you wanted to see us graduate. Like you didn't want to see us like be back here again, and it just made me think like it's like a lot of people watching me, and like I don't wanna like you see me 20 years from now and I'm like my dad or I'm like my mom, or I'm like somebody who really didn't do nothing, anything with their life. I *wanna be like somebody* like ... ah she graduated... she's a doctor or she's a nurse, like I had her in my class. I talked to her, like be proud of me. (SH, IN12, 2011, p.5)

LA (Circle of Social Responsibility) told me "this Circle has changed everything completely!" and explained that she can see how much more confident she is when relating to others.

*I know how to deal with certain situations. I know how to act towards other people* so everything has just changed...I know if somebody doesn't act towards me like the way they should—like be respectful or something like that—you know, it's a part of life. Not everybody in the world is going to like you and not everybody is gonna understand ...so if somebody disrespects me or says something to me, it's like "you said something and I'm not gonna argue back with you, 'cause it's not the truth, so it's not gonna hurt me if it's not the truth so ....." (LA, IN20, 2011, p. 9)

AM (Circle of Congeniality) attributed her burgeoning confidence to both the support and inspiration of the girls in the Circle and to her independent-minded mother. Since in several Circle meetings, we had discussed some of the expectations and challenges for women in her culture (CN3/5; CN3/20), I was curious about whether AM

felt confident in voicing her opinions publicly in class or outside the Circle. In our interview she adamantly responded,

*I feel really confident... I do have rights as a woman and I can say whatever I want.... Just because I'm a woman doesn't make me have to be quiet and just cook, and you know... women aren't little pets that you can just make fun of!* (AM, IN8, 2011, p. 8)

What changes were occurring in their outlooks that gave them this confidence I inquired? One change was seeing themselves—both their personal attributes and their appearance—in a more positive light. When I asked GE (Circle of Playfulness), a student relentlessly teased about her weight, what she learned about herself in the Circle, she smiled confidently and said, “What other people say about me, don't really matter because I know who I am and my personality and stuff.” What happened in the Circle that helped her gain this newfound sense of confidence, I asked?

*Knowing that people love me and care about me, like their... remember how we went around and everybody said something that they like about each other, like I had no idea like they thought I was pretty and stuff like that ....* (GE, IN15, 2011, p. 3)

CA (Circle of Choices) expressed surprise when she discovered that she was “a funny and caring person.” As she described, “I knew that I was funny but I thought I was mean...I don't know.” Then she added, “I started to love myself more....Like how I look” (CA, IN13, 2011, p. 9). How did the Circle help her love herself more, I asked? When “SH said that I was pretty and then I realized that maybe I should look deeper into myself .... see the things that I like about myself” (CA, IN13, 2011, p. 9).

The humorous side of SH (Circle of Choices), CA's friend, also came out in the Circle. As she explained in our interview,

I didn't never get my own sense of humor because I was *always being so mad*. Now that we be here, like, I just be thinking, like I'm so goofy.

Yeah... *I like a lot of things about myself.* I think I got more confidence ... Like I always used to act like I had a lot of confidence when nobody really know I really had low self-esteem, but I think, like my confidence is getting' boosted up because I just sit down and I think about, like, I'm gonna have this face my whole life. I'm gonna be this person my whole life, *I might as well love this person who I am.* (SH, IN12, 2011, p. 4)

**Second sign: Feeling empowered to speak their voice.**

Brown and Gilligan (1992) explain in *Meeting at the Crossroads* that girls struggle between expressing their true selves based on their genuine experiences and emotions, and the fear of rejection and alienation by their peers and others they care about. The need to belong and be accepted is so strong that hiding one's beliefs and opinions often takes precedence over genuine openness and authenticity. Several of the girls, however, found the safety of the Circle provided the support they needed to stand up for themselves and speak out on issues they otherwise would have remained silent on.

***Standing up for herself.***

IY (Circle of Resilience) is such an example. She came to the Circle with very few words and a deep sadness over the loss of her mother the year before. Often she sat silently in the chair rocking one of the sock dolls. In one meeting, however, she began to open up about the mistreatment and disrespect she was experiencing with her current boyfriend. After some reservation, she showed us the graphically rude and hurtful text messages he was sending her. When she requested feedback from the girls on how to interpret his behavior, the collective wisdom was to "stand up to him" and "not let him treat you that way" (CN8/4). She explained in her interview that

the little advices, like about my boyfriend and stuff like that, it really has *helped me be more confident* because like, usually I just not say nothin' to the stuff he say, but now, like *I'm speakin' up more* and he like has changed differently. Like he has like more than enough respect for me.



Like he doesn't say anything like the text messages I showed you. He doesn't say none of that anymore. (IY, IN 28, 2011, p. 5)

I asked her what she did differently in her relationship after talking to the girls in the Circle.

I just spoke up and I told him, "*I'm not a hoe; I'm not a B; you're not gonna' talk to me that way.* And if you think you're gonna talk to me that way, then you might as well just leave!" (IY, IN 28, 2011, p. 5)

The courage to stand up for her own dignity and justice, even though she was emotionally dependent upon her boyfriend and vulnerable after her mother's death, boosted her self-confidence.

GE (Circle of Playfulness), who already suffered from low self-esteem, was struggling with hurt feelings whenever she and mother got into conflicts. After the Circle encouraged her to talk to her mother about this, their relationship began to change.

It gave me a little courage to maybe like after my mom is talking, I can maybe like come to her and be like, and show her how I feel—not like telling her I think it was wrong what you said, not like that—but like, if she says something to hurt my feelings, I can be like, "That really hurt my feelin's or something like that" and not like be scared.  
(GE, IN15, 2011, p. 5)

She proudly described how after a recent argument her mother asked her, "What's wrong?" and she was able to say "It hurted like when you said that," and her mother apologized (GE, IN15, 2011, p. 5).

For both of these girls, being able to openly and honestly express how they felt when they were hurt not only *empowered* but also taught them the meaning of *respect* and how they wanted to be treated. They also realized that by standing up for themselves they could influence the course of events and relationships in their life.

***Openly expressing their opinions.***

Besides learning to set boundaries and stand up for themselves whenever they experienced an injustice or dignity violation (Hicks, 2012), others described a newfound courage to *express their points of view and opinions* without worrying so much about what other people think. ON (Circle of Resilience) described how she had become more assertive because the Circle

*has built confidence in me. You know I never used to speak out. Now I'm tellin' everything and I don't usually tell everything about how I feel. If I feel something is bothering me about you ..... I just be like 'O.K. look I gotta talk to you about something. Something you did really bothered me and its itchin' me...it's getting on my nerve and I gotta tell you.' Now I'm like that and it's really changing...* (ON & IE, IN29, 2011, p. 12-13)

NN (Circle of Silence), an introverted, pensive girl from South Asia, used to think,

*"Oh what if I say this, what if they think this about me," but now it's like I don't really care what people think about me, as long as I am happy with myself. Then I'm o.k. with it. That's why I don't really keep my opinion to myself unless like, let's say I just think something rude sometimes, or like if I'm in a bad mood, I'm obviously not going to say that.* (NN, IN3, 2011, p. 8)

LA (Circle of Social Responsibility), the precocious 15-year old who asked to speak to three classes of 5<sup>th</sup> graders about staying on the right path (Chapter 6), also expressed surprise at her emerging capacity to voice her opinions. As she said,

*I didn't know I could be so strong. I didn't know that I was like so strong about my opinions... Like when I see something, I stand up for it and I didn't know I could stand up for it... you know and keep myself guarded up and not let anybody break me down on how I feel.*  
(LA, IN11, 2011, p. 6)

When I inquired whether she thought she was uncovering her "inner voice," she replied,

"Yes! I think this person, sitting right here in this chair.. is ME!!! I feel comfortable. ....

More confident....*a lot more confidence in how I talk.*” And you were not feeling that way before, I asked?

No.....never! I would always try to be like someone I wasn't ... always try to follow the crowd when I don't wanna follow the crowd. I wanna be the one standing out even if it takes me being alone. Just standing away from everybody and *standing up for my beliefs.* (LA, IN11, 2011, p. 6)

The same was true for UE (Circle of Social Responsibility) who found that standing up for her beliefs and being a person true to herself was more relevant than trying to be someone she was not. As she said, the Circle provided a forum where she could not only be herself, but it

helped me *express myself* more... 'cause I've always like had an image in my head of what a person should be and what a person should have, you know.. but it's made me realize that like *it doesn't matter, you are you* and you should be your image, not a picture of something else or somebody you see. Be your image to follow! (UE, IN14, 2011, p. 3)

This new insight made her feel more comfortable with herself and allowed her

*to open up like to other people;* to like talk to them; to actually *just hold a conversation* instead of just like beatin' around, just like whatever... Hi... what are you doing...stuff like that. (UE, IN14, 2011, p. 3)

In other words, when she and the other girls gained confidence in expressing themselves authentically, they discovered the power of talking with people on a more substantial and meaningful level.

In the next Chapter 6, *Transferability of Awareness*, I look at how the development of these emotional literacy skills translated into real life experiences, enhancing eight of the girls' self-efficacy. As they improved in their listening skills, gained competence in handling their emotions, especially anger, and developed their capacity of empathetic understanding towards others, many of them reached higher levels of awareness and were empowered to speak from and live by their authentic selves.

## CHAPTER 6 TRANSFERRING AWARENESS INTO ACTION

Some of the most intensive, inspiring and animated discussions we had in the Circles concerned the girls' explorations into the world of choices that would best serve their interests, or, the consequences of choices they made that were not in anyone's best interests, especially their own. The co-creative Circle became a protective container in which they mulled over their options for addressing challenges; listened to themselves and to others tell their individual stories; and gave and received constructive feedback. This supportive microcosm, rich in collective wisdom, became a testing ground for gaining self-efficacy.

Another part of my second research question dealt with whether the growing awareness of their power and potential as young women manifested in their daily lives. In what ways were they able to apply the knowledge and skills they claimed they gained in the Talking Circle (Chapters 4 and 5) to make choices that positively impacted both their own lives as well as the lives of others? There are brief accounts of the girls putting their awareness into action peppered throughout the dissertation, but in this Chapter I focus specifically on a few poignant examples to illustrate the development and application of their emotional literacy skills and rising self-efficacy.

### Peers Helping Peers

A theme consistently emerging throughout the personal interviews, as well as in my notes taken during the Circles, was the girls' spontaneous reactions to help each other whenever the situation arose. We know from the emotional literacy literature that empathy – the capacity for recognizing emotions in and having compassion for others— is “the building block for all *social competences*” and the maintenance of strong

interpersonal relationships (Weare, 2004, p. 44). The collective empathic support of the Circle, as we shall see in the next few vignettes,<sup>11</sup> provided the girls with the encouragement they needed to better understand and *manage their emotions*, especially during times of stress. I have divided this section into two parts—support and encouragement given to an individual by the Circle as a whole, and support and encouragement provided by one Circle member to another.

**Group support.**

***Saying “no” to provocation.***

IE (Circle of Resilience) came to the high school late in her freshman year, seeking a fresh start after being involved in too many fights in another local high school. She joined the Circle during her junior year. Her story reveals how, with the care of the Circle, she learned to manage her emotions of fear and anger, as well as her impulse to fight, when threatened by girls from another school. During our interview, she described noticing a change in how she handled her anger when, after the funeral of her “godbrother,” she was told that several girls were planning to “jump” her. It is important to note here that such threats are not taken lightly, especially among girls who have experienced the dangers of such unpredictable and sometimes violent attacks.

Her initial reaction was to take the offensive and confront the one who made the threat, but when she told the Circle about the situation, she said they “helped me like try not to lose my cool.... Like with every time I saw the girl I just wanted to slap her. The Circle helped me not get too rowdy and violent!” I asked whether she would have tried to fight the girl and her friends before she joined the Circle.

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<sup>11</sup>These are compilations constructed from field notes and interview data to illustrate a particular moment in time or event (Van Maanen, 1988).

More than likely. More than likely. Because, like I know where the girl, like, where she stay. I know where her friends stay. It was just like, “you all talkin’ about causin’ danger in my life!” But I didn’t go to that route because I felt like ... I just felt like *it needed to be a change... like I’m not gonna stoop down to their level. I’m gonna think highly of me!*  
(ON & IE, IN29, 2011, p. 9)

“So just being in the Circle helped you come to that conclusion?” I asked.

Yeah, because I really didn’t think about it like that. I just thought like, “dang, now I gotta fight somebody.” ‘Cause they talkin’ about they tryin’ to jump me. The only thing I know is that *I’m tryin’ to graduate. I’m not tryin’ to go to jail.* I’m not tryin’ to do anything wrong. It’s like I’m tryin’ to do everything ... I mean by the law. Because I been stayin’ right for so long. Next thing you know, I’m not gonna start easin’ now and takin’ a different route and then that route gonna be crooked.  
(ON & IE, IN29, 2011, p. 10)

Here it appears that her friends’ genuine reactions in the Circle made her realize there were alternatives to fighting and that her long-term goals to graduate were most important. The girls she said,

gave me advice. It was like, “Just calm down!” “Don’t think about it!” Like “Don’t let that stress you.” And I felt that since I was here in the Circle, all six of these girls was able to help me. It did help me like, stop everything because.... I mean the conflict. It was probably still goin’ to happen either way it goes because the girl, she never liked me since middle school, so she could of found anything and everything to try and pin it on me to start something, but since I had the respect and the boundaries.... Like they (the girls in the Circle) drew the line. They was like right here, right here! “This is what you need to do! Just calm down!” They was basically tellin’ me, like they was my parents, like you don’t need to do that ‘cause *think of what’s gonna happen if you do!*  
(ON & IE, IN29, 2011, p. 10)

Ultimately, she followed the advice of her Circle friends who were firm in their resolve about her not responding to the girl’s provocation. Even though most of the girls in her Circle had a history of fighting, the collective wisdom of the group was to encourage IE to practice nonviolence and to ignore the girls’ baseless threats, which subsided once IE showed no interest. Here I want to call attention to the effective and

positive impact of peers helping peers especially when one is feeling confused and stressed.

This year, as a graduating senior, IE accepted the invitation to serve as a role model for 8<sup>th</sup> grade girls in the Transitional Circles (described below) and as a mentor to a freshman girl with similar anger issues and fighting inclinations (FN66, April 20, 2012). Her deepening empathic competence recently shone in a Circle, when she led the group in providing decisive advice and firm support to SS, a girl in extreme distress over broken relations with her mother and stepfather (FN67, April 26, 2012). SS was thinking about running away, but IE with the others, talked her into finishing her last semester in high school (which had to be extended into another semester due to lack of credits) and suggested ways she might try to get along with her stepfather until she could get out on her own after graduation. As SS was sobbing, IE went over and put her arms around her and said, “We’ll help you.”

After the Circle, I sent a text to IE with the following message, “IE, I am continually impressed and moved by your compassion. You have a true gift of caring. I know you will do something special with your life.” She responded, “Thank you, and I am very thankful for all the work that you have did for me and the group. I wish we could do the Circle for a longer period of time.” I knew she had her own issues she wanted to share with the group that day and texted her with the following message “Yes, especially today. I had a sense you also had something on your mind but there just wasn’t time.” She replied, “There was something, but I rather help SS out” (IE, personal communication, April 26, 2012). The conscious choice to set aside her own needs to be fully present with SS reveals a highly developed level of emotional literacy.

***Changing tactics with her brother.***

The next story told by GA (Circle of Social Responsibility), who is 15 and dreams of being a pharmacist, speaks again to the power and influence of the Circle in helping girls make changes in their behavior that positively affect their lives. Often in GA's Middle Eastern culture, when a father dies, the eldest son is given the decision-making power for the household, even at a very young age. Since GA's father died when she was three years old, she has always had to defer to her 23-year-old brother who currently makes all decisions regarding her social activities with friends, learning to drive, or going on school field trips (CN 4/17). This has been difficult for her and within the safe harbor of the Circle GA has shared her confusion and embarrassment about her family dynamics, which sometimes has erupted into verbal and physical violence (CN 4/5, CN4/11, CN4/13).

When I interviewed GA two years after being in the Circle, I first asked what the Circle meant to her.

GA: I think like... the two years I've been in this Circle...like *it changed me*. Yeah, it changed me because I used to be like depressed, you know... always sad, like not happy. When I came here, it was like gone, because *I had somebody that I could talk to...*like about anything personal.... I ask them, like, "What should I do? What should I do?" and they give me the feedback. Yeah.. .like the Circle did help me a lot! That's why I think it changed my life. Now I'm like a better person, you know.  
(GA, IN30, 2012, p. 1-3)

When I asked how she felt she was a better person, she explained she was happier now because the situation with her family, especially with her brother, was getting better.

GA: Like me and my brother....we don't argue as much no more. I've changed my attitude... you know, the way I act. I used to like have this attitude towards my brother. Like I would talk back to him and now I just keep it in. I just like shut up, you know. Like once



he tells me something, like yells at me, I'll just like keep it down, you know. Yeah, it doesn't escalate.  
Like I'm processing that, you know. I'm getting better at that. Sometimes, I do cry, you know.. but it's all good... It's life.

ANN: So did the girls help you with this?

GA: Yeah...when they told me to just walk away and don't let him like overcome you, and I did walk away. I took their advice and I did it! Like every time I walk away, and don't say nothing, like it turns out good. 'Cause like I don't hear him yellin' anymore so, yeah. *I'm using all of their advices they gave me.* Everything they tell me, I used it, you know. (GA, IN30, 2012, p. 2)

ANN: Do you feel like you are more competent now and could speak to him in a different way?

GA: Yeah, like me and him were talking, because we have this school trip on Saturday. And I had asked him, like "Can I go?" and he's like "No." And I'm like O.K. and when I asked him again, he's like, "O.K. you can go, but this is the last time," And then he goes, "You know, I have people watching," and I'm like, "Is it that you don't trust me?" And he goes, "I trust you but the people you hang out with..." And I'm like, "O.K. whatever." I want to tell him, "what about the people you hang out with?" you know. (GA, IN30, 2012, p. 8)

ANN: Like when he said no, what did you do? What would you have done before?

GA: You know what I did? I actually said, "O.K." I didn't actually yell at him, you know. Before I would have been like, "Why not? What's your problem?" I would have like... (*She hits her hand on the table, indicating some sort of aggressive reaction*).

I asked whether she thought her behavioral change had helped and she said, "Yeah, it helped because he actually said yes at the end."

GA is part of a multicultural Circle with girls whose families allow them more freedom and who frequently talk about their dreams of going to college and having a career. In the interview, she enthusiastically mentioned how the girls have supported her dream to be

a pharmacist and they said, “Do it!” And they give me like the courage to do it! Like if there was college applications, they’d tell me, “Grab it!” “Do that one!” “Sign that one!” You know...yeah...like the Circle did help me a lot! (GA, IN30, 2012, p. 6)

She continued,

GA: It’s not really about the culture because a lot of Middle Eastern girls are going to college and school and all of that good stuff.... But it’s just the family members. Like my brother. Like I’m gonna go to school. I’m gonna go to college; I’m gonna finish what I gotta do...And he’s not gonna stop me from what I gotta do to go there! You know!!

ANN: So what will happen if he tries to stop you? Could he be violent again?

GA: So there’s 911!!! But I don’t think he will, you know, because I told him that I want to be a pharmacist....I wanna see what the future is for *me*. I don’t wanna sit home and be cleaning! I wanna see what I can do! (GA, IN30, 2012, p. 4 -5)

Relying on the girls’ support and their encouragement of her dream, GA found another way to handle the power struggle with her brother since it only led to conflict and she could not change the mores of her culture that honored her brother’s status. Ultimately, her conscious choice to control her emotions and not respond aggressively to her brother’s restrictions or provocations not only empowered her but, unexpectedly, gave her more freedom.

### ***Speaking out in class.***

In the South Asian and Middle Eastern culture, girls are encouraged to be demure and quiet to avoid calling unwarranted attention to themselves or their families. Consequently, many face challenges in North American classrooms where their participation is expected and often a designated part of their course grade. In this story, we hear how one student, AM (Circle of Congeniality), was inspired by the inner fortitude of some of the girls in her Circle, especially LU, who “can do a lot of stuff that

other girls can't do." LU's aura of confidence inspired AM to "find that courage" within herself, which she manifested in more open class participation (AM, IN8, 2011, p. 10).

AM: I don't like to read out loud, but now I realize that I do read out loud. Why shouldn't I read out loud... just because I'm a girl? Like in my 5<sup>th</sup> hour, I am in love with my 5<sup>th</sup> hour! It's English! And I just realized that whenever we have like a new story, I just want to go up there and explain to the kids what's it about, what happened! Sometimes we have dialogue and we can't really understand what's going on, so when the teacher explains, I get it! And I just get so interested and we have presentations on Monday and like, I'm so ready for it!

ANN: And you weren't like that before?

AM: I wasn't like that at all!!! I was just like ... I was really interested in English, but I wouldn't ever go up there and try to explain the meaning or anything.

ANN: And what changed you?

AM: I think what changed me was that *people should see what I think!* People should see how I'm intelligent; that I'm not really dumb! And I am somewhat smart and I want people to see that, and I don't want people to think that I'm just dumb and that's it! That I can't do anything ... that I can't become anything, *because I can and I want to prove it.*

Like seeing LU, I don't know, sometimes just seeing LU she has that courage within her...how she can do a lot of stuff that other girls can't do. I want to thank LU for helping me find that courage in me....I was like a little girl that would just say whatever was in her mind and scream... Now I can talk calmly and say my point of view and still win the fight! That feels so great!  
(AM, IN8, 2011, p. 9-10)

Being in a Circle, she said, with all women made her realize

AM: that we like have different minds, and... I want to know the minds that we have, that women have. It feels good! And being with men, I realize that they have little comments to say about girls being dumb! Being with girls, they don't make those little remarks about girls being stupid! (AM, IN8, 2011, p. 10)

AM, gregarious and intelligent, also listened to other positive role models in her life, such as her mother and another best friend outside the Circle, who encouraged her to find her voice, but she claimed the Circle is what made her “calm” and helped her “become aware of her emotions.” As she said, “I knew I had emotions but I really didn’t know that I had so much emotion” (AM, IN8, 2011, p. 6). We have seen in the emotional literacy literature that becoming more aware of our emotions leads to greater confidence in managing them. AM confirmed she is learning to “control” her emotions, as evidenced by her newly found courage to speak and show her intelligence in class.

### **Individual support.**

#### ***Learning self-control.***

TA’s (Circle of Choices) story is about a teen who had more self-control than she realized when facing a potentially volatile situation. When TA joined the Circle, she was struggling with pain, anger, and poor impulse control she claimed stemmed from witnessing the aftermath of the brutal murder of her beloved stepfather several years prior. This inner turmoil often led to external conflict in her life and since conflict was prevalent in the lives of many of the girls in the Circle, we often talked about managing anger and their impulse to fight in our Circle meetings (CN9/5; CN9/6; CN9/7; CN9/9; CN9/12).

Our end-of-year interview revealed TA’s pride in how she found the self-control to walk away from a fight.

I had got into it with this girl over something stupid ... I can’t even remember what, but it was over something, ‘cause I was texting her brother and she took his phone. Then she had made a smart comment and then from there we were going back and forth, back and forth.

Then I was gonna’ go fight her but I had called SH— she in Circle too! She was just saying like, “Don’t go do that. In the end, it’s not

gonna be worth it. You gonna regret doin' it. Just keep talking about it and let all of your feelin's out. Don't keep it in 'cause its gonna make it worse!" So I just listened to what she told me and I just stopped texting the girl and ...then it was all over. (TA, IN7, 2011, p. 2)

Shy with few friends, it was important that TA could rely on SH to provide the moral support she needed to make the choice to disengage from the texting interaction. I asked what she learned about herself from this experience and she said:

At first I thought that I couldn't control myself and when I got mad I had to take it out on somebody else or something. But now I know that I can control myself and *I feel safer*—like being around people when I'm mad and stuff—I know that I can control myself and I know that *I won't do nothin' that will harm them or myself*... At first, I didn't have control at all. (TA, IN7, 2011, p. 2)

The knowledge that she is safer now because she will not hurt herself or others implies a growing confidence in her ability to self-soothe (Gallop, 2002), manage her emotions and subsequently, take responsibility for her actions and behavior. She did not want to look like “how people look when they cussin' and they fussin'! They look real ignorant.... Before I was just as loud and as ignorant as they were, but *now I think that I've bettered myself. I know better*” (TA, IN7, 2011, p. 2). Knowing how to handle difficulties in relationships is an essential step towards maturation and social competence (Bocchino, 1999; Goleman, 1995; Weare, 2004). In TA's case, this social competence brought greater personal happiness and inner stability, which ultimately led to successful graduation with her class of 2012 and a future career in the military.

### ***Ignoring a bully.***

For several months in an afterschool program, GE (Circle of Playfulness) had been experiencing relentless teasing by a girl about a nonexistent “boyfriend,” about her weight and about her hair. On the verge of hitting the girl, she expressed her frustration

for the first time in one of our Circles (CN6/13). GE began to talk about the bullying but suddenly stopped, saying she was afraid I might say something to the program director making it worse for her. This surprised me, but I had mentioned earlier in the Circles that everything I heard was confidential except in cases where they were getting hurt or they were going to hurt someone. This information I would need to report to the school's social worker. Aware that those being bullied are often afraid to tell adults because of potential reprisals by the bully (Christensen, 2008), I assured her that I would not go to the program director on my own unless she agreed to go with me. Instead, I suggested that we discuss as a group the best ways she could help herself deal with the bully behavior. She liked this idea and proceeded to provide further details of the teasing and how she was feeling.

GE's friend, AH, who was also in the afterschool program, stepped into the conversation and said, "I'll help you!" AH began telling GE how the bully had tried to tease her but that AH had simply avoided her and the bully got "bored." AH began demonstrating different mannerisms GE could use in response to the girl's words—such as rolling her eyes and tilting her head, while saying, "Oh, whatever" in a bored voice, or just ignoring the remarks and staying by AH if the girl came over to their table to taunt GE. The two of them comically practiced these gestures in the Circle that day and by the end of the hour, they were all laughing with GE appearing more confident (CN6/13).

The bullying did stop several weeks after that Circle thanks to the assistance of AH. When I asked GE what happened, she explained, smiling, that the girl had been used to seeing GE become sad and irritated when the teasing started, "so she just kept going," but when GE "just kept talking to AH," ignoring the bully and acting "like I don't

even hear it. She just stopped talking.” GE expressed surprise at how simple it was and concluded that

it was better for me to just like ignore her... I thought she was goin’ be like comin’ up in my face and then say what she says, but she just gave up (GE, IN15, 2011, p. 6). If I wasn’t in the Circle, I would have hit the girl.... Like I would have just got so mad that I just would have hit her because it was happening over and over and over and over again.... (GE, IN15, 2011, p.12).

Would hitting have resolved the situation, I asked? “No! I would just want to fight her again every time I see her” (GE, IN15, 2011, p. 6). Having successfully thwarted the stinging words of the bully and no longer feeling intimidated, she told me she

felt smart! Like it was smart. Like I was just thinking about if it would have resulted in physical action, what would have happened. I probably would have gotten suspended. It depends upon who hit the person first and then I don’t know if I could have been a criminal lawyer with like 10 days suspension on my record. (GE, IN15, 2011, p. 6)

It is important to note here again the power and potential of peers helping peers. When AH stepped up and offered to serve as GE’s support person, GE was emboldened to deal with the bullying behavior in a different, more effective manner. Before, unable to confront the bully alone, she thought her only outlet was to “hit the girl” until other options were discussed in the Circle meeting that day. Targets of bullying experience a sense of powerlessness and often keep their pain and embarrassment a secret (Christensen, 2008), which is what GE had done for several months. However, once she gained strength in her ability to handle this tense situation without fighting, she felt “smart.” Such level of confidence sows the seeds of self-efficacy.

### **Practical Application of Learned Skills**

The section above provides examples of teens consciously *changing their behavior* for the better when they chose to listen to the wisdom and accept the support of their Circle friends. In this section, I look at examples of how the girls applied specific *techniques* they learned in the Talking Circle to circumstances that arose *outside of the Circle*.

Before presenting the more detailed stories, however, I remind the reader that we have already seen examples in earlier chapters of girls changing their behavior as a result of what they learned in their Circles. Recall DN (Circle of Volatility) in Chapter 3 who modeled for her brother and father how to listen to each other and not interrupt based on what she had learned about listening in the Circle; UE (Social of Responsibility) in Chapter 4 who, after learning in Circle to value diverse opinions, became more accepting of those who were different from her, especially during contentious circumstances; EL (Circle of Playfulness) in Chapter 5 who, after becoming aware of her “attitude” in the Circle, began changing her behavior towards her mother; and RI (Circle of Playfulness) in Chapter 5 who chose to stay away from general gossiping once she saw the pain her friend in Circle experienced as a target of gossip. These are all instances of how a new understanding or skill was applied to a daily situation.

#### **Using conflict resolution techniques.**

##### ***Reminding a friend of “flow.”***

In this story, we meet SH (Circle of Choices) again, but this time as the student who received assistance from CA, another member of her Talking Circle. CA claimed that she originally came to the Circle, “because if I don’t come then I be like go back to



my old ways and like talk about people a lot, and like have anger management problems more” (CA, IN13, 2011, p. 1). While a major step in CA’s development was recognizing the importance of the Circle for managing her own anger issues, she also exhibited another level of maturity; that is, taking responsibility to intervene and successfully encourage her friend, SH, to use a safer, alternative route for resolving a potentially dangerous conflict.

In one of CA and SH’s Circles, I had introduced three fundamental options for how they might respond to conflict—*flight* (running away and/or ignoring the problem); *fight* (getting into a verbal or physical altercation); or *flow* (openly discussing the needs and wants of each person involved in the conflict) (CN 9/14). One day after school, when CA discovered SH was on her way to fight a girl in a nearby alley, she remembered this information.

Yeah...I was talking to SH about the *flow*...so I could calm her down. She was mad at the time and I was like, “Yeah, you need to learn how to do the *flow*,” and she was just like, “What?” I was like, “In Circle, you need to learn how to do that!” And then we was just talking about it. Like she was about to go fight somebody and then I talked her out of it. She was like, “Yeah, maybe I will just go talk to her (*the girl she was about ready to fight*),” and stuff like that. (CA, IN13, 2011, p. 5-6)

“Had she come to you for advice,” I asked?

No I just ... like when people like go and do stuff...I don’t go there to watch it ... I’ll walk with her. My intention in my head is like to walk with her, walk with them, and like talk with them and *try to talk them out and like usually half way there, they just get talked out of it* and then we just go back and then they don’t do it. (CA, IN13, 2011, p. 6)

It took some time to pull out her story of bystander intervention and for me to figure out that CA did not know at first that SH was heading towards the fight until she started walking with her as they normally do after school. Our conversation continued as

follows: “And so you were walking her to the fight?” “No, I was followin’ her and tryin’ to stop her, like stop her from doin’ what she did. And then I did, and then we didn’t do anything *because I talked her out of it.*” “You talked her out of it? Was the girl there waiting?” “Yeah.” “And she was ready to fight?” “Yeah, ‘cause that girl, I know her for like 3 years now and she’s like a really bad person.” “So did SH go and talk to her?” “Yeah! You see we were talkin’ about the *flow, but for the flow, we had to talk about it and like make everything better so this won’t happen again.*” “So it’s settled now?” “Yeah!” (CA, IN13, 2011, p. 6-7).

In this particular circumstance, CA not only exhibited higher-order thinking when she reminded SH of the option of “*flow*” or “talking over the conflict with her opponent,” but she also revealed another emotional literacy skill—the ability to recognize emotions in another. Realizing the potential outcome of those unresolved emotions for SH, and out of compassion and care for her friend, CA chose to intervene to prevent a fight.

### ***Remembering the “stoplight.”***

VE (Circle of Resilience) is a student whose family often expressed their anger violently and in this vignette, we observe how a visual image helped her make different choices during a time of stress. Early in her Circle, I had introduced the image of a stoplight<sup>12</sup> as a tool they might remember when wanting to gain control over their anger and reduce the negative effects of their impulsive reactions (CN8/3).

Her story began when I asked whether she had learned anything about herself in the Circle.

<sup>12</sup> red light = stop and calm down; yellow light = think of a plan; and green light = problem solve wisely.

VE: Yeah...I always have to just re-think, whatever, before I do things. Before I *just thought on an impulse* and now I just have to stop, think, and you know, worry what would happen if I did this or did that.

Curious, I asked what we did in the Circle that inspired her to think more and resist acting impulsively?

VE: Ah... when we first began the Circle, you had the little lights... the little stoplight, so I had to ... *instead of just thinking about red*, I have to just stop on that red, and slowly get ready for yellow and then when green comes, I'm calm and I can just go walk away.

ANN: So that was helpful having that visual image in your mind when you got angry?

VE: Yeah, and also talking to you and my friends about it, you know... my problems and how you guys would help me. Like don't do that because then this will happen, or if you do that, then you'll probably go to that place (*juvenile detention center*) or stuff like that....

ANN: Can you give an example of a situation where you really used that stoplight? Can you think of a situation where you really thought through the consequences if you did something?

VE: Yeah... I would have to say me getting into an argument with my aunt because she really doesn't like me, which is strange because I'm her niece. So when I got into an argument with her, she was saying that if I put my hands on her—because when I get mad I get physical—so she said if I put my hands on her or whatever, the police was just right down the block so she'll call the police *asap*.

And so I had to stop and then I had to think because I'm arguin' with an adult here. She's supposed to be the bigger person and then she wants to argue with her niece. Then apparently I need to be the bigger person. I mean I had to stop... I thought about it... I don't want a criminal record just because the police—she'll over exaggerate to the police—I could touch her and she'd say I punched her and she has a bruise, so I had to stop and I had to think... I have to be the mature one here and *I just walked away*.

ANN: So was she getting ready to hit you?

VE: Yeah, she was knockin' stuff over and it looked like she was about to hit me. I mean I was gettin' mad too 'cause she was tearin' up my grandma's house. I told my grandma what she was arguin' about, how stupid it was and my grandma came and she had a talk with her and...later on, me and my grandma just sat and ate cookies! (VE, IN31, 2012, p. 2)

“Just sat and ate cookies” was the way VE concluded her story, but as she spoke there was an apparent acknowledgment of her power to choose how she was going to react in a tense situation. It was also an affirmation of her positive choice about ending the physical violence that both she and other family members engaged in periodically to resolve their conflicts. Recently she told me there had been no more arguments between the two of them (VE, IN31, 2012, p. 2).

### **Organizing Circles to address conflict.**

Besides introducing the conflict resolution techniques described above, several of the girls facilitated their own Circles to resolve conflict and problem solve with friends and family.

#### ***Lunchroom Circle: Intervening in a group conflict.***

TR (Circle of Diversity) began assuming a leadership role early in the Circle by virtue of her standing as a graduating senior who had “pulled herself” out of compromising circumstances and had been accepted to college for the next year. During our interview, she relayed how being in the Circle made her realize that she was “a role model to a lot of people” (TR, IN9, 2011, p. 3) and clearly, from her expressive gestures and humbled tone of voice, she took this responsibility seriously. To illustrate her point, she described an incident in which she prevented a major fight from breaking out in the lunchroom by facilitating a Circle between some of the girls in her Circle, and another

girl who usually sat at their table but was creating tension among the group. As she told her story,

TR: One day the whole Circle that we have now, we all went to the table... and we had a problem with this girl named AG. So we all made a Circle and we explained it like, "Don't nobody get mad. Don't nobody holler or scream and whatever," but AG, she still screamed and whatever, but everybody still be calmed down. So I'm like just "don't even jump to her little age limit and whatever. If she wanna act like she elementary, then let her, whatever!"

So everybody stayed calm, or whatever, but LL (*the girl who organized their original Circle*)... you know LL ... she feisty, so LL, she was goin' like say something and I just stopped her and said, "It ain't even worth it or whatever. Let her (AG) speak. Let her do it, if that's how she want to present herself by yellin'! Let her present herself by yellin' but *you all are gonna act like females and talk quietly and tell her how you all feel!*" So LL and them, she quieted down, so everybody was tellin' her (AG) how they feel. (TR, IN9, 2011, p. 4)

Everybody listened to each other, but the one girl, AG. She just screamin' and stuff and everybody was just quiet, so she just yellin,' so all we laughin' like it ain't even that serious, so we laughin' and whatever, so she still like "Ain't nobody gonna beat my ass!" and we like, "AG, it ain't nothin' about beatin' or nothin'!" *We just want to know how you feel and how everybody else feel, whatever.* So then the next day it improved because the little table was kind of quiet, whatever.

ANN: And AG was with you at the table the next day?

TR: Yeah.. so it was quiet whatever, but then like a week after, it was still the problem with AG, so the whole table was just like, came to her like, "We feel like, we feel like all the problems is with you, AG, so it's better that you find another table and whatever to sit at because we don't have time for this little situation." So she started sittin' at the other table, so that improved, so the table started gettin' along afterwards, so she just went about her business at another table. (TR, IN9, 2011, p. 5)

ANN: How does it feel to be the facilitator and prevent a conflict from escalating?

TR: It felt better because it's like drama is too much for me whatever. I've been through a lot, but people don't know that, but it's like little situations that can get big! But *just make your life simple*. It's better that we do that than try to make a big situation because as soon as someone yellin' or screamin,' then somebody wants to jump in somebody's face and then to fight and it could have happened in that Circle when AG yelled at LL and the other people.

I inquired whether she thought they were able to handle the conflict differently because they all had been in the Circle together.

TR: Yeah, because it's like most of the people that's in our Circle was at the table and we know how each one of our attitude is, so I knew who was gonna end up sayin' something, which it was LL. So I had LL by me and I told LL how to calm down...how we're doing the Circle and whatever. So that made it real better.  
(TR, IN9, 2011, p. 5)

When I asked her whether she was pleased to learn these conflict resolution skills, she said, "Yeah, *because it can better my life.*" (TR, IN9, 2011, p. 5)

I have provided this story, replete with details, because it highlights two relevant points regarding the question of empowerment and effecting positive change in their daily lives using tools they learned in the Circle. First, TR discovered her ability to not only guide her peers through a tense situation, preventing escalation of a conflict which most certainly would have led to suspensions for many of the girls, but she also had the tenacity and insight to calm LL. The fact that LL was willing, after TR's encouragement and support, to tell AG how she felt about AG talking about her behind her back—without getting into a physical altercation—was a major achievement for LL in impulse control and speaks highly about TR's positive influence on her.

Second, even though they were surrounded by several hundred other students eating their lunch, the Circle process they established for themselves around a lunchroom

table provided a safe and structured format for each of the girls to express their feelings verbally rather than physically, and to be heard in a respectful manner. Many of the girls in the school are not used to resolving conflict by first listening to each other. Even though their final decision, after they tried to work out a solution to remain friends, was to tell AG that she had to sit at another table, it was a solution they all agreed upon and abided by without a physical fight.

***Children’s Circle: Teaching them how to love rather than fight.***

Aside from organizing a Circle with her peers in the lunchroom, TR (Circle of Diversity) took this new skill home and changed the aggressive relational dynamics of the children in her large family. In her interview, she described how she has many young nieces and nephews, “approximately 17 or 18,” and many come to play with her neighbors at her house. She found this tiring because

you know how kids will play, but then they get mad and angry and cry or wanna push each other. So it’s like one day, I made like 10 of them or whatever, have a Circle, and I asked like “Do you love that person?” and “Why do you love that person?” So they all talked and they told them why, so then, some of them laughed, some of them were like “oh...” or whatever, and then I made them hug after they told them so. Then after that, they was playin’ good, after that. (TR, IN9, 2011, p. 6)

“And you got that idea from being in the Circle?” I asked surprised. “Yeah, in the Circle!” she said smiling, exuding a sense of pride. TR’s spontaneous Circle taught the squabbling children an alternative and more constructive way of addressing each other and provided yet another opportunity for her to serve as a role model.

***Family circle: Problem solving together.***

The next story is about LA (Circle of Social Responsibility), a wise, well-seasoned freshman that was involved in high-risk behavior during her middle school

years, but in high school began showing strong leadership skills both in her Circle and among her classmates. Today she serves as an elected class officer. As she tells it, she chose to intervene in her family dynamics when her brother was

doing bad, like in school, like really bad. He gives the teachers an attitude and doesn't care about his work and he'd write anything on a piece of paper and then you know, the teacher kept calling my mom. Of course, my brother, he's going to say, "Oh, you know, she's not telling the truth, etc."

And then he thinks my dad's life was easy 'cause my dad, he dropped out in the 5<sup>th</sup> grade....in the old country. And after that my dad has been working since he was in the 5<sup>th</sup> grade with granite and marble and doing all of that... Now he has a company. You know he gets us whatever we want but my brother doesn't get that you, in America, you need to finish school. You can't even be a janitor if you don't have a high school diploma. (LA, IN11, 2011, p. 3)

Worried about her brother who did not understand the value of education and was falling behind academically, and her father who did not understand her brother, she said to her mother that

we have to go in a Circle! Yeah, I was just like, "*we should just sit down and each of us explain how we feel and just tell him how everything is.*"

Well, we sat on the couch. My dad was sitting on the floor. My brother was sitting next to him. I was sitting across from my dad and my mom was sitting next to me. Yeah, and then my mom told my dad what was the problem and then you know, my dad, like started yelling at my brother and I was like, "No don't yell at him. There's a lot of things! One, he thinks he is going to be like you and he thinks it's going to be easy for him 'cause he thinks it was easy for you. He doesn't understand."

And then my mom says, like, "J, you have to spend time with him... 'cause there might be things that he wants to say, but he can't say it to me because I'm a female and you're a man." And then my dad says, "He doesn't have to be around me to be smart and stuff like that." My brother is like "yeah, I have to come and work with you so I can see how it is!" (LA, IN11, 2011, p. 3)

As this family conversation continued, they discussed her brother's reading problems and LA recommended taking him to a doctor to see if he has a learning disability because "when you have trouble reading, everything is hard for you and you



have to make like my dad understand that!” During the remaining conversation she said they “problem solved,” coming up with several options for how her brother might spend more time with their father after school and for LA to help him with his homework—another example of her thinking beyond herself and helping others. “Then my mom just went to go make coffee!” she concluded her story, laughing.

ANN: Do you think everybody felt good about the conversation?

LA: Ah...my dad, he really doesn't express his feelings but, you know, he like laughs a lot, just not to show his emotions either if he's angry or is happy. For my dad, I think, he was like “Oh, I'm cool with it.” And the same goes for my mom. She was like “Oh, you know, finally J is gonna take him and spend time with him.” And then my brother, I think, he was like happy because he gets to work with my dad. And I felt good....(LA, IN11, 2011, p. 4)

ANN: Was your experience in our Circle an influence on your decision to hold a Circle at home?

LA: Yeah, because I don't think I really would have like sat down with my parents and my brother and expressed how we feel or what we could do to help him...(LA, IN11, 2011, p. 4).

Her story ends with this note of pride.

LA: My parents think of me, kind of wise, I don't know if that's a good word ...and they think, “she does know good things for her age,” because I've changed a lot over the years. They say, “like she knows a lot. You know she's not a troublemaker anymore!” (*she laughs*) (LA, IN11, 2011, p. 3)

LA's ability to successfully provide and facilitate a dialogic structure so that her family could communicate better attests to her growing self-competency and emotional literacy skills. Her brother's behavior at school, she said, has improved since the family Circle was held. We see more of her emerging self-efficacy and empowerment in the next section.

### **Serving as Role Models**

A role model is one who has qualities that others want to emulate to better themselves and they help others see their own potential. Some of the girls exhibited their emerging self-confidence by wanting to serve as role models to younger students, ranging in age from elementary to high school.

#### **For elementary students.**

##### *Inspiring talk.*

For instance, when I asked LA whether she was interested in facilitating other Circles with her friends or family after being empowered with the success of her family Circle, she replied,

*I've gained a lot of confidence.* I want to go to the elementary school and like I never liked talking in front of people, but I want to talk in front of all the students, and, you know, tell them how everything is... like not just a Circle, but like a speech, 'cause I'm older than them and some of the kids do look up to me when I go to the school—like I went to school there 'til 6<sup>th</sup> grade and it's a lot of the kids who know me 'cause of my brother, 'cause of my sister, and they all look up to me and stuff like that. I want to go to the elementary school and talk to all of the kids!

(LA, IN11, 2011, p. 4)

Quite surprised by this declaration, I asked what she wanted to tell them.

LA: I just want to tell them that that's where it all starts—in elementary school. It's like you think someone's your friend and they're like the biggest troublemaker and you think that's nice, and you think it's cool for kids. That's like how kids get introduced into drugs and stuff like that. (LA, IN11, 2011, p. 4)

ANN: So do you want to specifically talk to 6<sup>th</sup> graders?

LA: I think it's more 5<sup>th</sup> graders that I want to talk to. I wish I could talk to the 6<sup>th</sup> graders, but some of the 6<sup>th</sup> graders already have their minds set.... and that's the grade that I used to think, "Oh, everything I do is right. Everything I do is o.k.".... Like 5<sup>th</sup> grade, you know, that's when my bad years started.

(LA, IN11, 2011, p. 4)

Wanting to encourage this self-generated initiative, I immediately contacted the Restorative Practice Coordinator at that particular elementary school and LA's talks were scheduled several weeks later. On the day of her talks, the 5<sup>th</sup> grade classroom teachers, the RP coordinator and I watched LA exhibit grace and confidence when she captivated the attention of the students with her story of taking the wrong path in 6<sup>th</sup> grade and how that choice almost led to her downfall. To illustrate her impact, I share the following notes I took that day:

LA, nervous but poised, began her talk by showing two pictures on the overhead projector—one of a smiling, successful businessman, standing with his coat jacket causally slung over one shoulder and holding a briefcase in the other hand; the other, a disheveled middle-aged man lying in the street surrounded by liquor bottles and garbage. She loudly and poignantly asked them, “Who do you want to be?” The students immediately responded to the first image and from that point on she held their interest and attention.

She described the difference between a job and a career, explaining that if they only want a job (such as a janitor, hotel worker, or waiter), they still have to have at least a high school diploma. A job, she said, is something you do to make money but you can easily get bored, so they should find a career, such as an archeologist, architect, or lawyer. She explained that one has to be passionate about their career choice since they will want to be in their career until their 60s! She said they would have to go to college to have a career and that she was going to be a psychologist, which would take many years of college.

She then moved into her personal story, which I had never heard before. She talked about how the Restorative Practice Coordinator who had been her 6<sup>th</sup> grade teacher at the time (I did not know this) had given her a chance in life that she would never forget. Explaining that she had been close to failing 6<sup>th</sup> grade because she had gotten involved with a “bad crowd,” LA said the Restorative Practice Coordinator, who saw her potential, told her she might take a chance on her, if she could write a convincing essay as to why she should pass to 7<sup>th</sup> grade. LA said the Restorative Practice Coordinator's belief in her began changing her negative perspective of herself (the Restorative Practice Coordinator who heard this for the first time was profoundly moved), but it wasn't until 8<sup>th</sup> grade that she realized she needed to get away from the peers who were having a bad influence on her. She told the kids that she is the only one of her former friends who made it to 9<sup>th</sup> grade—one failed her 8<sup>th</sup> grade year;

two completely dropped out of school, are smoking weed and drinking; and another is pregnant again after she already had an abortion in 7<sup>th</sup> grade. Then she asked the girls, whether any of them wanted to be pregnant in several years. Giggling from embarrassment and surprise, they exclaimed, “No!” and then she said, “Well, kids our age can’t even take care of ourselves, so how can we take care of a child?”

In closing, she described how the teachers do not make enough money to waste their time with kids having their “little attitudes” and not studying. She emphasized how much the teachers do care and they, the students, should start caring about their future and listening to the teachers. Several of the teachers smiled and nodded, moved by how much appreciation she was showing for their efforts. One whispered she should be a poster child for their Teachers’ Union! She closed her talk by saying that she came to talk to them before they got into the wrong crowd and made the same mistakes.

Needless to say, all of the adults listening were in awe of how this freshman girl—once considered a “lost” child—was a source of profound inspiration to not only the younger ones, but to the adults as well. LA and I walked back to the high school and shared her success with the principal, who gave her a big hug (FN 63, April 30, 2011).

I present this story in detail for several reasons. LA not only represents a student whose early signs of failure never deterred a trusting teacher, but also a student whose increasing self-efficacy and sense of empowerment influenced and created positive change in the lives of others. Serving now as an elected class officer in her sophomore year, she has found yet another structured avenue for effecting that change.

The question is whether being in the Circle helped facilitate LA’s emerging capacity to lead and make a difference in others’ lives. In response to this question I offer a few of her closing words during our interview:

*Everybody is changing into a better person when they have these small Circles .. I think all of us have learned to see in a different way and I treat people differently. The Circle has made me want to go out now to the public and speak. I want to call the President and tell him that we can no longer go into other people’s countries; that we can no longer go to war. I want to speak and do some good... you know... help change the world!*  
(LA, IN11, 2011, p. 12-13)

**For middle school students.**

***Transitional circles.***

At the very end of a Circle meeting one day after winter break, LA and UE (Circle of Social Responsibility) suddenly began talking about the tension in their friendship over a conflict that had erupted a few days earlier in the middle school between UE's friends and LA's first cousin and her group of friends (CN 4/12). Although these girls were freshmen in high school, many students still remained in close contact with their 8<sup>th</sup> grade friends from middle school, situated only four blocks away.

As their conversation evolved, it became clear to both LA and UE that neither wanted to be drawn into the middle school "drama" that had led, over the weekend, to physical altercations at the skating rink and police intervention. The unresolved conflict rapidly spread through Facebook as more and more girls chose sides. The Restorative Practice Coordinator in the middle school prepared an emergency restorative Circle in an attempt to reduce the impact of the evolving conflict.

"I wish we could just go talk to those girls and like tell them how stupid this is! We don't want to get involved! We don't want to fight!!!" I said, "Well, why can't you? Perhaps the Restorative Practice Coordinator and I could set up a Peacemaking Circle for you to meet with the girls and tell them how you are feeling about this" (CN 4/12). With the firm intervention of a few parents, the growing drama in the middle school was squelched within the week, and the joint Peacemaking Circle between the high school and middle school girls was canceled out of concern that further discussions might reignite the conflict that had been laid to rest.

However, the idea of establishing Transitional Circles between high school and 8<sup>th</sup> grade girls was born with the primary objective of preparing the middle school students, both socially and academically, for their transition into high school. During Spring 2011, we established a pilot program with 20 high school girls who met with approximately 50 8<sup>th</sup> grade girls over a period of two months in eight different Circles. We matched them with their own ethnic group since girls coming from the more structured Muslim culture of South Asia or the Middle East posed different questions than the girls from the Balkan or African-American cultures. Each of the eight Circles lasted approximately one and a half hours.

To reduce their initial timidity and embarrassment, we asked the 8<sup>th</sup> grade girls before the Circle to write questions anonymously on 4” x 6” note cards which we read aloud for the high school students to answer. Once comfortable with each other, the 8<sup>th</sup> graders asked their own questions, making the open dialogue even more animated and informative for all. Some of the most common questions included, “What was your first day of school like?” “Who can I ask for help if I get lost?” “Do the boys act crazy?” “Is there a lot of homework?” “Will I have to study?” “Do I have to swim in gym?” “What if I don’t know how to swim?” and “Who is your favorite teacher?” (FN 64, May 3, 2011).

During our walks back to the high school after the Transitional Circles, many of the girls commented on how they wished someone had come to talk to them about high school life. “I might have had a totally different experience! Sure wouldn’t have gotten in so much trouble” (DA, Circle of Volatility). “It would have made things so much easier” (AM, Circle of Congeniality). “Now we really have to live up to what we told

them to do” (HE, Circle of Congeniality) (FN 65, May 17, 2011). The Transitional Circles proved to be so popular with both the high school and middle school girls that they were organized again in spring 2012 with 26 high school girls sitting in seven different Circles with 80 8<sup>th</sup> grade girls. A similar program is now being implemented in one of the local elementary schools with middle school girls serving as role models to the 6<sup>th</sup> graders.

Even though our initial intention was to provide the 8<sup>th</sup> graders with peer information about how to be successful in high school—in hopes of reducing some of their adjustment problems—we were surprised by the positive impact the Transitional Circles also had on the high school girls. Many asked if there was a way they could help the incoming freshmen in September when they arrived in the high school and, seeing their excitement, I suggested the possibility of creating a Peer Mentoring program for the 2011-2012 academic year (FN 65, May 17, 2011). LU’s (Circle of Congeniality) spontaneous reaction represented the voices of many. “Oh, I’ve always wanted to do something like that! I’d love to! It would be such an honor” (FN 65, May 17, 2011).

I have observed that many teens genuinely welcome opportunities to assist others and I believe these altruistic gestures should be encouraged and supported as much as possible in schools. Perhaps IE (Circle of Resilience) summarized it best when in response to my text of appreciation for her participation in the second year of Transitional Circles in spring 2012, she wrote, “No, thank you for giving me the opportunity. Its an experience that I will take with me” (IE, personal communication, March 15, 2012).

It is important to draw attention to the difference between the girls’ intention to help each other make positive and productive decisions in their personal lives (as

described in the stories above), and their intention to help their community by wanting to become role models. In effect as their self-efficacy grew, they applied their knowledge to create systemic as well as individual change.

**For high school students.**

***Mentoring incoming freshmen.***

Thus, based on the input of the high school girls, we established a pilot Peer Mentoring program in the fall 2011 with 11 mentors chosen from the Circles and 22 mentees. Five of our mentors were from South Asia, three from the Balkans and three were African-Americans. As in the Transitional Circles, we matched the mentors with mentees from the same ethnic background.

Even though we faced multiple challenges in coordinating weekly meeting schedules, finding private spaces for their meetings, and keeping the teachers abreast with the fledgling program to maintain their support, the first year review of the program from the students' perspective was generally positive with certain qualifications. Some comments extracted from an informal questionnaire included:

I really feel good about the mentoring program. I feel like I am making a big difference to my peer's life. It's a good way to ensure their safety by teaching them about the unnecessary mistakes that freshmen always have. (FN 68, May 2, 2012)

The mentoring program is okay. I love being sort of a role model to them. We don't have a place to meet and we waste time looking for a place and explaining to teachers why we're there. (FN 68, May 2, 2012)

I actually love the mentoring program because I'm not only helping I'm also learning from my mentees. I just don't like how sometimes my mentees are busy in their class and can't come. That's very sad. (FN 68, May 2, 2012)



Unfortunately, due to the upheaval in the academic sector (a move to the block schedule and attempts to meet state requirements for improved academic success), as well as the absence of available meeting space in their 1930 building, the Peer Mentoring program will be placed on hold for the 2012-2013 academic year. Both the Transitional Circles and the Peer Mentoring program, inspired by the students themselves, however, continue to be part of the overall ethos of the high school's Restorative Practices program. Aside from making the school a more cooperative and supportive environment, a primary goal of the new programs is to provide students with opportunities to be empowered change agents that make a difference in their own educational community.

In summary, I began this chapter with a question of whether and how the teens applied their expanding knowledge, skills and power in their daily lives and became positive change agents not only for themselves but for others as well. We saw that both TR (Circle of Diversity) and CA (Circle of Choices) used their influence and newly acquired conflict resolution skills to steer their friends away from a physical fight by reminding them of the impact of the calm, spoken word. TA (Circle of Choices) discovered she had more self-control than she thought and walked away from a fight with the guidance of a Circle friend. GA (Circle of Social Responsibility) listened to her Circle peers and changed the disturbing relational dynamics with her brother. IE (Circle of Resilience) listened to the collective wisdom of the Circle and walked away from the taunting threats of girls who wanted to “jump” her. She was “tryin’ to graduate, not go to jail.” TR (Circle of Diversity) and LA (Circle of Social Responsibility) became responsible role models, holding Circles with their family members—one to encourage children to play together better; the other to help a brother resolve his academic problems

and bring the family closer. LA also volunteered to speak to 5<sup>th</sup> grade students about making positive life choices. Finally, some of the girls inspired the creation of the Transitional Circles with 8<sup>th</sup> grade girls and the Peer Mentoring program for incoming freshmen. In each of these stories of individual and systemic change, the girls claimed their decisions were influenced by the techniques they learned in the Circle, a friend in the Circle, or the support and wisdom of the whole Circle.

## CHAPTER 7 CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

This dissertation is the first systematic, qualitative study of gender-specific Talking Circles organized in a school. It is also the first systematic study of Circles organized under the auspices of a Restorative Practices program based on sociological theory—the Relational Cultural Theory. Restorative Justice or Restorative Practices’ programs were brought into schools in the nineties in response to growing concerns about zero tolerance policies and the ensuing high rate of suspensions and expulsions (Karp & Breslin, 2001; Stinchcomb, Bazemore, & Riestenberg, 2006). It quickly became clear that restorative measures, such as Peacemaking Circles or Restorative Conferencing, were highly effective *reactive* tools for dealing with the aftermath of harm and the restoration of relationships (Cameron & Thorsborne, 2001; International Institute of Restorative Practices, 2009; McCluskey et al., 2008; Riestenberg, 2004). During this time, educational research also was pointing to the academic and emotional benefits of *building closer relationships* among students and staff (Blum, McNeeley, & Rinehart, 2002; Resnick et al., 1997); judicial scholars were advocating *gender-specific programs for girls* in schools before they got into trouble (Chesney-Lind, 2004); and educators were stressing the need for *emotional literacy* training in schools (Hopkins, 2004).

Based on this research, I decided to investigate whether gender-specific Talking Circles could be a *proactive* tool for helping students a) build *growth-fostering relationships* inspired by the Relational Cultural Theory (Jordan, 2010); and b) develop *emotional literacy skills* (Goleman, 1995; Kessler, 2000) and *self-efficacy* (Bandura, 1994). In other words, within the context of a school, I wondered whether teenage girls could co-create their own safe and supportive microenvironments, grounded in the core

social values of Restorative Justice and Restorative Practices, and whether the Circle environment could support growth-enhancing relationships and social emotional learning? These were my two research questions.

Solomon, Schaps, Watson and Battistich (1992) argue that “core social values such as justice, tolerance, concern and respect for others....must be developed through *direct, personal experience*” rather than in a vacuum, and students “must be able to see and experience the values in action in their daily lives in school” (p. 43). After nearly two years of active field research facilitating and documenting Talking Circles with adolescent girls in a high school, I conclude that the Talking Circle—an emergent and collaborative space structured to support the values of respect, equality, interconnectedness, and deep listening—provides such direct, personal experience for students. Furthermore, this type of out-of-classroom Circle addresses some of the psychosocial and emotional needs of students that do not appear to be met in other school venues, and provides a unique opportunity for the flowering of authentic, age-appropriate relationships.

This final chapter focuses on how and why I came to this conclusion based on three fundamental observations; that is, the Talking Circle provided a safe space to nurture *growth-fostering relationships*; growth-fostering relationships supported and encouraged the development of *emotional literacy skills*, which led to *personal power*; personal empowerment gave rise to *self-efficacy*. I then go on to present some of the challenges I faced as Circle keeper in maintaining the safety and integrity of the Circle, discuss the limitations of the study that have led to suggestions for further research, and conclude with my vision of the Talking Circles for schools.

### **Nurturing Growth-Fostering Relationships (RQ1)**

The Talking Circles were established on the premise that people, according to the latest scientific research, are “hardwired to connect” (Brazelton et al., 2003); that “all growth occurs in connection; that all people yearn for connection; and that growth-fostering relationships are created through mutual empathy and mutual empowerment” (Jordan & Hartling, 2002, p. 49). In our Talking Circles, I observed the early stages of deep connecting as soon as the girls began sharing private stories about vulnerable aspects of their lives, which gradually softened the barriers of fear and resistance. Their raw openness paved the way towards *authentic intimacy*, defined by Rachel Kessler (2000) in *The Soul of Education: Helping Students Find Connection, Compassion and Character at School*, as a “deeply caring, mutual respectful relationship with another person” (p. 20).

Teenagers, writes Kessler (2000), are not afforded many opportunities for nourishing this kind of intimacy and many yearn for a deeper connection with others. We know from research and the Relational Cultural Theory that this is particularly relevant for adolescent girls since intimacy or deep connection is a central feature of their friendships (Brown, Way, & Duff, 1999; Miller, 1976; Miller & Stiver, 1997). For adolescent girls, friendships can be “a source of both knowledge and great strength, as well as a source for struggle, hurt and confusion” (Brown, Way, & Duff, 1999, p. 217).

#### **Elements of friendship.**

Steve Duck (1983), a communication scholar in the field of relationships and author of *Friends, for Life: The Psychology of Close Relationships*, claims, however, “friendships do not just happen. They have to be made—made to start, made to work,

made to develop, kept in good working order, and preserved from going sour” (p. 9). Friendships, he states, provide us with a sense of belonging; emotional integration and stability; opportunities to communicate about our self; physical and/or psychological support; reassurance of our worth; opportunities to help others; and support for the development and integration of our personality (pp. 15-27). In other words, authentic friendships, as he describes them, are mutually empowering relationships that motivate us to be the best we can be. Encouraging and supporting the facets of friendships outlined by Duck is an overriding intention of the Talking Circles.

**Characteristics of growth-fostering relationships: “Five good things.”**

To answer my first research question of whether growth-fostering friendships emerged in the Talking Circles, I turned to the standards set by Jean Baker Miller, the founder of the Relational Cultural Theory, who claimed the following “five good things” characterize mutually empowering relationships.

- 1) A sense of *zest* or wellbeing that comes from connecting with another person or other persons;
- 2) The ability and motivation to take *action* in the relationships as well as other situations;
- 3) Increased *knowledge of oneself* and the other person(s);
- 4) An increased *sense of worth*;
- 5) A desire for *more connections* beyond the particular one.

(Jean Baker Miller Training Institute website, 2012).

Consideration of the data reported in Chapters 3, 4, 5 and 6 reveals that all five characteristics were apparent. One of the prominent relational themes described in

Chapter 4 was the students' expressed joy or *zest* to be together. We heard from AM (Circle of Congeniality) who felt "really happy and grateful" to see her friends each week; RH (Circle of Congeniality) who said it "makes me happy because we can talk about stuff; ON (Circle of Resilience) who liked being "around the people that I love and care about;" and DN and AJ who came to the Circle because they were "around people who care about you and want good for you." In fact, from a purely somatic perspective, the level of energy, vitality and aliveness permeating most of their meetings was at times difficult to curtail, especially in the Circle of Playfulness, Circle of Diversity and Circle of Resilience.

Miller and Stiver (1997) describe the second component, taking *action* in a relationship and beyond, as responding "in the moment of the immediate exchange" because we only affect each other when we *interact* (p. 31). Aware that this "immediate exchange" often empowers us "to act in realms beyond," I tried to be judicious when enforcing the use of the talking piece, which could have interrupted their spontaneous and potentially fragile interactions. The "immediate relational interplay" was particularly apparent when someone needed comforting, solicited advice for handling a delicate situation or wanted to be empowered to take a specific action. As examples, I remind the reader of the impact such peer interaction had on IY in confronting her abusive boyfriend (Chapter 5); or GA in dealing with her domineering brother (Chapter 6); or GE in addressing the after school bully (Chapter 6). Each was empowered because of her interaction with other members of her Circle.

Our interaction with one another in a growth-fostering relationship encourages us to *know more about ourselves*, as well as *about the other*, which is the third characteristic.

Returning to the examples provided above, all three teens, IY, GA, and GE, gained strength in the knowledge and recognition that they held the power to change a stressful situation by changing their behavior. This is self-efficacy at its best. A review of Chapter 5 provides other instances of teens gaining new insights about themselves, and altering their behavior accordingly, ranging from letting go of gossiping and stereotyping because of its harmful effects, to managing their anger in a more mature way. Greater knowledge and awareness of themselves, and how they respond to others, helped them navigate in the world and become more self-sufficient.

A *sense of self worth* is the fourth characteristic of mutually empowering relationships. As Miller and Stiver (1997) explain, “We cannot develop a sense of worth unless the people important to us convey that they recognize and acknowledge our experience” (p. 32). Many examples of girls’ boosted self-confidence and sense of worth abound in this study. For instance, we recall LA feeling proud when she went to talk with 5<sup>th</sup> graders about responsibility and was rewarded with a hug from the principal (Chapter 5); or DN being proud when her father reflected back the listening skills she had taught him and her brother (Chapter 3); or TR gaining confidence when the other girls in the Circle relied on her maturity and calmness (Chapter 3); and LU feeling pleased with herself for consciously changing her relationship with her mother and siblings, as a result of what she had learned from her peers in the Circle (Chapter 3). For others, holding the talking piece, which they equated with “holding power,” and receiving the individual attention and recognition during the Circle’s “check-in” and sharing of “burning issues,” boosted their confidence and sense of well being (Chapter 4). There were others, like ON, TA, SH, and CA, who began liking themselves better when they observed their



ability to self-soothe and control their anger (Chapter 5). Statements by the girls suggesting a greater appreciation of their inner worth served as evidence for their evolving self-confidence.

Finally, “as a result of the increased zest, empowerment, knowledge and worth,” claim Miller and Stiver (1997), we seek an even deeper or *fuller connection* with others (p. 34). I remind the reader of TR who said that since being in the Circle, she “just wants to get tighter” with her friends (Chapter 4); or NN who claimed their “friendship bonds are just getting deeper” (Chapter 4); or LU who stated their Circle worked because they were becoming closer and “developing their friendship bond” (Chapter 4). We also remember the girls who joined the Transitional Circles to connect with 8<sup>th</sup> graders, or become mentors to 9<sup>th</sup> graders (Chapter 6). In summary, I observed all five components of growth-fostering relationships, identified by Jean Baker Miller (1976), in various stages of maturation within the Talking Circles.

#### **Safety and trust factors.**

Trusting and feeling safe with each other were crucial in the development of their growth-fostering relationships. In fact, my data abound with comments referring to the Circle as “comfortable;” a “security blanket;” “a little oval that is protecting us from the rest of the world;” and “a safe place.” It was a space where they could “tell each other our deepest thoughts and feelings;” “develop deeper bonds with all of my friends;” “talk about stuff;” and “trust each other” (Chapter 4).

How was a sense of trust, which ultimately led to feeling safe, established and maintained in the Circle? While the value of trust is difficult to articulate, we know when something or someone is trustworthy and we also know when we have lost that feeling of

trust. In addition to the girls' own commitment to being trustworthy, there are ways a Circle Keeper may contribute to building trust in a Circle, ranging from the Keeper's own demeanor and awareness, to introducing practical initiatives, such as:

a) Defining and getting everyone to agree to the *Circle guidelines*, some of which the participants help create and which serve as a default mode when behavior occurs other than the expected standard of the Circle;

b) Emphasizing the importance of and getting everyone to agree to the *code of confidentiality*, with an understanding of the consequences if broken. As far as I know, the code of confidentiality was never violated during the two year research period which is remarkable considering sharing secrets is considered a key element in the relational development of girls (Brizendine, 2006). If, for some reason, a participant does not agree to the guidelines or the code of confidentiality, the girls themselves will flush out the reason and explain their importance, which occurred in both the Circle of Choices and Circle of Diversity (Chapter 3).

c) Introducing ceremonies, or *rites of passages*, at the onset of the Circles to establish a tone of seriousness and relevance. For instance, each girl wrote on a small paper plate the value(s) she wanted to bring to the Circle, and tied her individual ribbon to the others' in honor of a person that made them each the "good person" they are today. Even though most of the girls were not accustomed to ceremonies, once I explained their value, they took them seriously and participated wholeheartedly (Chapter 2).

Since their own paper plates with the written values and the circle of ribbons were placed on the floor cloth in the center of their Circle each week, it was easy to remind them of what they said they considered most valuable whenever they were moving

towards behavior that was not in the best interest of themselves or the integrity of the Circle. This weekly ritual was particularly important during times of dissent. For instance, when several girls in both the Circle of Volatility and the Circle of Social Responsibility were arguing, they still insisted on meeting in their Circles (Chapter 3). The question is why? I contend they knew deep in their heart that the Circle's core social values, laid out in front of them, represented the best of whom they wanted to be and that this is what LU, LA (Chapter 3), TR and CA (Chapter 5) meant when they claimed the Circle had made them into better people. It could also be that the Circle was the safe collaborative space of acceptance, which I have articulated and demonstrated throughout my data.

#### **Communication styles used in building relationships.**

During the 257 hours of meeting in Circles, I observed among the groups three different modes of communication that were an integral part of the relationship building process:

a) the *ordinary* conversation, or what I called 'lunchroom' chatting, in which they conversed about daily life or, as RI (Circle of Playfulness) quipped, "when we're not talking about anything like important. Just stuff that happened" (RI, IN17, 2011, p. 5). This style of communication most often occurred when they entered the room from the hyperactive hallway and were settling into the Circle milieu. The ordinary conversation would continue for a few minutes until they were calmer and we could begin the Circle meeting by lighting the candle and checking-in. While not always successful, we tried—with the assistance of reflective inquiry and reinforcement of the use of the talking

piece—to focus on both confiding and reflective dialogues, leaving the ordinary conversation for outside the Circle.

b) the *confiding* dialogue in which they shared personal issues and stories. This style of communication occurred during all three phases of the Circle—the “checking-in,” “burning issues” and “topic of the day”—and, because of its heartfelt authenticity, served as the dialogic component that held the Circles together and built the deeper bonds of connection.

c) the *reflective* dialogue in which they explored thought provoking questions that stimulated both intellectual and emotional growth through the exchange of ideas and diverse viewpoints. ON poignantly explains in Chapter 4 that reflective inquiry is a way of bringing thoughts “to the front of your brain” and not letting them “stay at the back of your head.” I observed that the reflective dialogue not only provided the girls with opportunities to think more deeply about issues, but also allowed them to hear different perspectives, which softened their opinions about others and paved the way towards a deepening capacity for empathy (Chapter 4).

### **Developing Emotional Literacy Skills (RQ2)**

My second research question focused on whether Talking Circles provide the appropriate environment and support for building emotional literacy skills and encouraging self-efficacy, and if so, how do those skills manifest in the girls’ everyday lives. Emotional literacy is the ability to understand our emotions, the ability to listen to others and empathize with their emotions, and the ability to express emotions productively. When emotionally literate, we are able to handle our emotions in a way that improves the quality of our lives and our relationships (Steiner, 1997, p. 11).

### **Circle environment for emotional literacy work: Yalom’s curative factors.**

To determine whether Talking Circles are an appropriate environment for emotional literacy work, I turned to Irwin Yalom (1995) who outlined, in *The Theory and Practice of Group Psychotherapy*, 11 “curative factors” or elements that facilitate and promote *social emotional learning* and *personal change* among members of a group. All the curative factors were present in varying degrees in the Talking Circles but four stood out as particularly beneficial for the girls’ emotional literacy development: *universality*, *direct advice*, *imitative behavior* and *catharsis*. I examine them more closely here as a means for evaluating the overall effect of Talking Circles and for those Circle Keepers who want to be more aware of the underlying processes occurring within the group dynamics.

#### ***Universality.***

The concept of *universality*, or sharing common experiences, suggests that we are encouraged and feel less alone when we know other people have similar problems as ours. This was a prevalent theme throughout the data. In Chapter 4, AJ explains that when she hears others sharing their problems she “feels so much better to know that you’re not alone and going through your problems alone.” NE realizes that “I’m not the only one and I don’t stand alone.” SH expresses surprise that the girls “talk about the same things that I feel and it’s just nice to have somebody who understands me.” NU observes that “they have similar problems as me” and that “I’m not the only one” and RH concludes “that we have similar lives....that there’s others like me.” Having “others like me” removed their sense of isolation and validated their experiences, which gave them confidence and established a common bond of understanding among them.

***Direct advice.***

This common bond of understanding built on camaraderie provided the foundation for them to both receive and offer each other suggestions for handling problems or personal issues. Yalom (1995) identifies this curative factor as *Direct Advice*. To respect each teen's privacy and comfort level in receiving feedback, one of the Circle's guidelines was to offer advice or feedback only if requested. After I explained that sometimes we only want someone to listen to us, they learned to preface their sharing with "I want" or "I don't want feedback on this." If one of the girls anxiously wanted to respond to what she heard, she would generally, but not always, say, "Do you want feedback on this?" There are many examples peppered throughout this study of the power of the Circle's collective wisdom and how that wisdom was imparted through *Direct Advice* and followed.

***Imitative behavior.***

Another curative factor Yalom (1995) identifies in a group is *Imitative Behavior*; that is, observing how someone handles a situation and then adopting that behavior for oneself. For instance, we recall how LU, after listening to the gentle way her peers responded to their siblings, changed her aggressive behavior towards her own brothers and sisters (Chapter 3); AM, inspired by the courage and independence of LU, tried to emulate her qualities by being more open and talkative in her own classes (Chapter 6); and how several girls in the Circle of Playfulness studied more when their peers' grades improved with studying (Chapter 3). Yalom believes that we develop our social skills by observing and then imitating other members of the group. That was certainly true with the girls in these Circles.

### ***Catharsis.***

The fourth prominent factor present in the Circle, *Catharsis* (opportunity for expression of intense emotion), was demonstrated both *physically* through animated and unpredictable body movements (for instance, jumping up out of their chair; slamming a fist into their hand; aggressively twisting or quietly rocking a sock doll; or deliberately squeezing or “picking at” the talking piece); and *verbally* by the declarations that their embodied emotions were “bottled up” and it was a “weight off their shoulders or chest” when they were discharged (Chapter 4). Many reported in Chapter 4 that talking to their peers in the Circle “released their stress” (LA); “averted a big crisis or falling out” (NN); “felt good to share feelings with others” (IM); and prevented them from doing something “crazy” (TA).

The teenage years, as evidenced by the way the girls expressed their embodied emotions and the topics they discussed in the Circle, are a period of great confusion and stress for many, especially when their inner and outer worlds collide causing rapid change and transformation. They are confronted, as they pointed out, with conflicting and often demoralizing messages of media and their own emerging sexuality; with having to adjust to their changing bodies, fluctuation of hormones and unpredictable emotions; with the after effects of their natural drive to individuate from parents or guardians; with the acceptance of their growing responsibilities as they move from childhood into adulthood; and for many, with the repercussions of the current economic crisis leading to poverty and family trauma.

Their Circle provided that safe, reliable space where they could authentically open their hearts and release tension around some of these internalized issues, as well as

receive advice and support when they needed it. Thus, based on self-reports and participant observations, I submit that the Talking Circles have the potential to serve as positive and caring environments for *releasing emotional stress and anger* before they manifest into disruptive behavior and indiscipline. Chesney-Lind (2004), a noted scholar writing about the juvenile justice system, has recommended establishing gender-specific intervention and prevention programs in schools to specifically help girls deal with their anger before they get into trouble with the law. One approach within a school context might be the creation of small Talking Circles as catharsis venues for releasing pent-up emotional energy.

#### **Social and emotional learning.**

Turning now to the social and emotional learning that took place in the Talking Circles, which I have described in Chapters 5 and 6. My research data suggest that involvement in the Talking Circle provided the girls with multiple opportunities to develop and practice the following five emotional literacy skills: a) self-control; b) listening; c) expressing empathy; d) managing anger; and e) resolving conflict constructively.

First, I contend that the structural format of the Circle, including the use of the talking piece for taking turns to speak and the implied standards of behavior based on respect and confidentiality, supported an environment for practicing *impulse control*. This was especially true in terms of the girls learning when to speak and when to listen, and realizing the importance of the code of confidentiality.

By creating a milieu in which they could respectfully and authentically *listen* to both themselves and each other without interruption, the girls discovered a viable



pathway to their own emotional repository, as well as to the emotions of others. In Chapter 4, we read how the girls understood they could really hear what someone said if they did not interrupt, or they did not have to talk as much because someone was listening to them, or they could resolve their conflicts better by also listening to the other person's perspective.

*Empathy* emerged as a result of the discovery that others have different perspectives, exalted by the giving and receiving of support and the feeling of acceptance. I have provided numerous examples throughout the data chapters of the impact of showing care and respect to each other, and the changes that both empathy and support inspired in some of the girls' lives.

As they connected to their emotions, especially the stress emotions of fear and anger, through reflective inquiry and our open discussions, they became *better managers of their reactions* during emotion-laden situations (Chapters 5 and 6). The combination of their emerging personal empowerment and newly acquired conflict resolution skills boosted their confidence for *resolving conflicts* in a safer and more productive manner. The fact they requested a Circle when they had interpersonal disagreements, as did the Circle of Volatility and Circle of Social Responsibility (Chapter 3), suggests the value they placed on the Circle as a unique conflict resolution format. In summary, the Circle provided an opportunity and a place where they could channel their emotional energy constructively and hone and practice their burgeoning emotional literacy skills. Confidence in their ability to handle their emotions encouraged the development of self-efficacy.

### Increased Self-Efficacy (RQ2)

Self-efficacy, Bandura (1994) notes, is a person's ability to exercise influence over the events that affect their lives. When I interviewed the principal of the school, I asked her why she thought it was important that I focus on recruiting girls for the Talking Circles and she replied,

We have girls with *efficacy* issues... These girls are being disrespected over and over and over again and that feels very, very normal to them. The kids allow themselves to be treated without respect because that is what they're brought up to feel. That is very disturbing to me and how we change...that is monumental. (PR, IN38, 2011, p. 3-4)

I asked whether she thought the Circles were an avenue for addressing both the *disrespect* issue and helping the girls realize their *potential power*,

I think the Circles are the start of what is going to be a long, long conversation for them, about *how to* relate and *how they are allowed to* relate. We're going to have to allow them to grow as a person and to develop the skills that allow them to advocate for themselves. And I think the Circle is a way to do it that's not intrusive to the community and it's not seen as threatening to the community. (PR, IN38, 2011, p. 4)

One of the principles of Restorative Justice and Restorative Practices, and one we advocate in the Talking Circles, is sharing power *with*, rather than having power *over* another person. The concept of sharing power with someone is grounded in respect and I contend, that if the girls experience being treated with respect in the Circle, they will be better able to give and receive that respect from others. They will know what it feels and tastes like. Being treated with respect is *empowering* and personal empowerment encourages personal change.

Two changes the girls observed about themselves was a greater sense of *confidence about their abilities and their bodies*, and *feeling empowered to speak their opinions* (Chapter 5). For instance, AM stood up for herself and being female once she

acknowledged her own intelligence (Chapter 5); EL and TL did not have to repeat the 9<sup>th</sup> grade because they began to believe they could get better grades if they worked harder (Chapter 3); and TA felt safer because she realized she could control her anger and would not hurt herself or others (Chapter 6). Again there are many other examples in Chapters 3, 4, 5 and 6 of girls creating positive changes in their lives because their beliefs about themselves and their abilities changed. This is self-efficacy at its best.

In summary, I observed that the Talking Circles addressed some of the psychosocial and emotional needs of students that apparently were not being met in other school venues, such as providing space and opportunities for nourishing their friendships, for developing greater self-awareness, for practicing emotional literacy skills and for encouraging and supporting self-efficacy. The Talking Circle became a microcosm where they could just be themselves and, unobstructed by judgment and fear, where they could grow.

### **Behavioral Changes Noted by the Principal and Vice-Principal**

I wondered if changes in their behavior were observed by others in the school and received some answers from both the principal and vice-principal. For instance, in our interview, the principal mentioned, “a lot of the drama has been tamped down by the Circles... because there was a lot of drama in the beginning and like I just awoke one day and like, whatever happened with that” (PR, IN38, 2011, p. 9)? “There are kids that are in the Circle that were in my office regularly at the beginning of the year,” who are no longer there and

nothing else that I’m aware of changed. I’m sure their parents got on them and all of that, but they stopped being in here (in the office). AR (Circle of Volatility) ... a perfect example! Constantly in trouble! And she just ... not that she doesn’t still get a bad attitude; not that she doesn’t still need to

be reigned in, but her whole like body language when she approaches... In fact I stopped AR in the hallway the other day... I saw her and felt it was important to say to her that she's matured this year and there's lots of things that tie into that, but I do think the Circle is part of it because she started to feel heard, as have a lot of our girls... (PR, IN38, 2011, p.2)

The vice-principal also saw a drop in "school drama" which he said was often tied to gossiping and "he said/she said" situations.

It happened a lot less because of the Circles, because you had a big mixture of girls and it wasn't all just local girls, all city girls, or anything like that ... It was a good mixture and .....*they had a dialogue*. They had a dialogue. They had a place where they could talk; where they felt safe and it wasn't, you know, 'Oh, out here.' (VP2, IN37, 2011, p. 4)

He expressed surprise that the girls upheld the code of confidentiality and did not share publicly the information they heard in the Talking Circle.

I mean just being out in the hallways and, everything else like that, you're not hearing stuff bla, bla, bla in the Circle or this or that ... You're not hearing that .. Where 9 times out of 10, I could tell you usually what's going on with who or whatever, even when I was in the classroom or just doing hall duty, you listen to the kids walking down the hall and they're talking about something big that's going on... The kids get so excited and feed into it so much that 'oh boy, this is big! This is big!' Where I mean stuff with the Circles, there's a *lot of privacy going on there, and it's not spillin' out into the hallways!* (VP2, IN37, 2011, p. 5)

In summary, these comments by the principal and vice-principal suggest two important factors relevant for schools. Talking Circles organized within the context of a school provide a safe haven where girls learn to *trust* and *respect* each other enough to honor the code of confidentiality and not be involved in gossiping which often leads to "drama." Secondly, the Circles offer a safe outlet for the girls to explore their own individuality and their differences through constructive dialogue, which not only helps in reducing conflict, but aids in building emotional literacy skills and self-efficacy.

### **Challenges to the Circle Process and Circle Keeper**

In this next section, I want to address the challenges I experienced as Circle Keeper during the 257 hours of Talking Circles. Chapter 2 already describes the problems I encountered in the initial stages of the project and how they were resolved. Creating a complex rotating schedule, which allowed the students to attend their weekly Circles without missing the same class more than once a month, solved the main problem of scheduling.

Once organized, I faced new challenges which I have narrowed to three: a) how and when to address broken Circle's rules; b) how to accommodate the needs of different age groups in a Circle; and c) how to handle the sudden onset of interpersonal conflicts that erupted in the Circle. Each of these, in one way or another, had the potential to threaten the overall integrity and, ultimately, the survival of the Talking Circle. They proved to be learning curves for me as both the insider (Circle Keeper) and outsider (researcher).

#### **Addressing broken Circle rules.**

The appropriate time and place to address broken ground rules was a complicated issue for me as Circle Keeper since the concept of the Talking Circle implies equality and “a leader in every chair” (Baldwin & Linnea, 2010). Yet, the responsibility of the Circle Keeper is to maintain the quality and integrity of the Circle process, especially if ground rules are not being respected. Because of my age and status as an “adult,” it was a fine line to walk between being viewed as the “Keeper” of the Circle and its values, *and* as the “authoritarian” figure, such as a parent or teacher, “telling them what to do.” If viewed as the authoritarian figure, I risked negatively impacting the ongoing relational

interactions of the group and “shutting down” the openness of expression they exhibited in my presence. On the other hand, if I allowed certain behavior to go unrestricted, I risked disintegration of the Circle process and the Circle’s ultimate demise. Mindful of both possibilities, I tried to instill the values of the Circle in the beginning, so the girls would monitor themselves, and each other, if or when the guidelines were forgotten. This did not always happen, however, especially when it came to texting or interrupting someone during the Circle meeting.

### *Texting.*

Texting surfaced in only two of the Circles—the Circles of Diversity and Circle of Volatility. At first the few girls who began texting tried to text discreetly, keeping the phone to their side, next to or under their leg, suggesting at some conscious level they were aware of it being a distraction. As the researcher I wanted to observe how this phenomenon affected the Circle dynamics, thinking it would only be that “one time.” As the texting persisted, however, I knew as the Circle Keeper, I needed to intervene and remind them of the rules of respectful listening. This generally halted the use but sometimes only until the next Circle meeting.

At one point, we held a discussion about cell phone use in the Circle of Diversity, since they had specifically listed “no cell phone use during deep conversation,” when we initially worked together on Circle guidelines (Chapter 3). They defined “deep conversation” as talking about something personal and emotional, but in their mind, it was appropriate to text during the “other kind of conversation.” After all, they were already texting in other social gatherings. I discovered that some of the girls, especially LL (the one who organized the Circle of Diversity and who eventually had to go to an

alternative school), did not consider it disrespectful especially if they were texting with a boyfriend or family member. That was considered “urgent” and acceptable. There were others in the Circle, however, who indicated it was “kind of” distracting, but would not say anything until I brought the subject up first. Since the issue of texting was never totally resolved, I learned from this Circle that cell phone use, and the consequences for cell phone use, must be discussed and clearly delineated when the Circle is first organized to encourage peer on peer monitoring.

Texting also gradually crept into the Circle of Volatility. As I pointed out in Chapter 3, the Circle of Volatility and their relational dynamics went through many phases of engagement, but they always wanted to “keep their Circle together” even at the height of their interpersonal disagreements. So why did a few of them begin to discreetly text once in awhile when they were sitting in the Circle together? In this case, I think over the months, there was a gradual, unconscious breakdown of the Circles’ internal structure, which I attribute to two reasons. First, they felt very familiar with each other and it became too much of an effort to “switch” into a more formal way of behaving and relating when in the Circle. Secondly, I believe, the arguing (described in the section below and Chapter 3) that occurred over the months, gradually destroyed the trust between them and reduced their level of respect for each other. Again, as in the Circle of Diversity, when I mentioned the texting and the Circle’s value of respectful listening, the girls claimed they did not see, nor did they mean for it to be disrespectful.<sup>13</sup> I tried to use these opportunities as teachable moments but was not always successful. Based on complaints from the teachers, however, there was an ongoing problem of texting they had

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<sup>13</sup> Circle Notes (Circle of Diversity), Day 15 and Day 18 (See Appendix A).

not gotten control of throughout the high school. Many of the teens sincerely believed they could focus both on the current conversation in the Circle (or the teacher's presentation) and text at the same time. When I heard this, I was surprised that this problem only arose in two of the Talking Circles.

***Interrupting another person when speaking.***

A fundamental guideline of the Talking Circle is to speak only when holding the talking piece, which in our Circles was the ball. I described in Chapter 4 how the girls valued the ball as both a tool of empowerment and a tool for better listening. However, there were times in all of the Circles, especially during the topics of discussion, when the talking piece was forgotten and the girls interrupted each other with their own comments or idea. As the Circle Keeper, I let this pass when it was infrequent and did not disturb the general flow of communication or offend anyone.

However, in several groups, such as the Circle of Playfulness and Circle of Resilience, where they practiced "*call-and-response*" (Foster, 2002), I struggled with when to intervene and when to allow the natural flow of their spontaneous responses. I erred on the side of leniency because I sensed relational bonding occurring as they told their stories. As long as they were focused on the girl speaking and responding to what she was sharing, I chose not to disturb their speech flow.

However, when *poor impulse control* was the reason for the interruption, I would intervene. It was easy to observe this occurring when they interjected an off topic response or started a side conversation. In the Circle of Playfulness, while not intending to be disrespectful, it was simply a challenge for them to think before speaking, control their conversation by using the talking piece, and stay on topic. Using those times of



interruption as teachable moments, I gently referred to the talking piece and said, “Who’s got the ball?” or “Are we being respectful?” They would giggle and attempt to get focused until the next time they forgot. My concern was determining when I could intervene without crossing the line.

### **Mixing age groups.**

The second challenge was addressing the behavior and needs of different age groups in a Circle. For instance, the Circle of Diversity consisted of a mixture of freshmen through seniors, who did not know each other well but still bonded as a group. However, there was a clear distinction between their levels of maturity, especially between the freshmen, LL and IO, who were not serious about their classes or staying focused in the Circle, and the senior, TR and junior, RA, who were aspiring to go to college.

Thus, my dilemma was finding topics with reflective questions that were stimulating for both age levels. This was not always successful. For example, the older girls talked about college and the ACT tests, whereas the younger girls discussed boys and having fun. They “came together” and showed they cared when someone had problems at home or at school and needed advice or just wanted to share their troubles. In other words, they bonded on current events rather than on common interests and long-term aspirations.

Another example was a group (one of the three not highlighted in this dissertation) organized by the gym teacher, which included three shy South Asian freshmen dressed in a *hijab* and *abaya*, and four effervescent juniors and seniors of Polish descent dressed in the totally opposite apparel of shorts or pants, and sleeveless

shirts. Although the Circle participants were respectful and friendly toward each other, they never bonded and by their 6<sup>th</sup> meeting, it was clear that the Circle was coming to an end. Because of their age and vast cultural differences, they simply did not have enough common interests to hold the Circle together.

Again, as the Circle Keeper, I struggled in this Circle with how much effort I should put into stimulating the conversation and trying to build relational ties through reflective questioning and other social activities. Concluding that that was moving into the role of facilitator and “feeling responsible” for the life of their Circle, I just observed its natural disintegration and by June 2010, only the Polish girls were coming to the Circle. Interestingly, however, during the next 2010-2011 academic year, the South Asians, who were by then sophomores, became the core members of the Circle of Congeniality, which they formed themselves. Their new Circle included girls of the same age and from the same ethnic background and, as described in Chapter 3, was one of the most cohesive of all the groups. Small group research claims this type of cohesion phenomenon is due to participants’ similar interests and background (Levine & Moreland, 1998).

Another example of mixing different ages in a group is the Circle of Playfulness. When they became sophomores in September 2011, they brought in a freshman student to replace EL, one of their core members who moved out of the district. Many studies describe the changes that occur in a group’s cohesion and dynamics when a new member joins (Levine & Moreland, 1998) and this certainly happened in the Circle of Playfulness. The freshman was a cousin of one of the members and knew the other girls in the group from middle school, but not well. I learned from this experience that it is not wise to put

family members together in a Circle since there is an unspoken intimacy and manner of relating they do not share with others. The main problem, however, was that her needs as a freshman, such as learning to adjust to the academic rigor of high school and to the intensified drama among girls, were different from the sophomores who already had a year of high school behind them. During the year, I observed that the behavior of the sophomores, who were already struggling with emotional literacy skills and maturation, seemed to regress to the level of the freshman rather than advance to a higher stage of emotional development.

In summary, based on this limited experience, it is difficult for me to generalize whether Circles are more or less cohesive and higher functioning with mixed age groups. If participants of the Circle have something in common, such as their friendship or a targeted purpose for meeting, then mixing the ages might be less of an issue. However, in the Talking Circles with mixed ages, I observed that the younger girls were unable to relate to some of the older girls' issues and there was a clear distinction in their level of maturity, thus limiting some of the topics for discussion and group interaction.

#### **Handling sudden onset of interpersonal conflict.**

The third major challenge to the Circle process and for me, as the Circle Keeper, was the very serious, interpersonal conflicts that erupted in three of the Talking Circles. It was not an easy task to move through these intense relational conflicts, especially since they occurred between close friends, causing deep emotional pain and threatening the wholeness of the Circle.

A clear benefit of the Circle is that it provides a supportive environment for expressing emotions safely and allowing the girls to constructively handle their anger.

Under most circumstances, this is what happened. However, there were some exacting times as well, especially when I was not warned in advance about a brewing conflict, and then it suddenly erupted in the Circle as the girls faced each other. This is what occurred in the Circle of Surprise, Circle of Volatility and Circle of Social Responsibility.

When the Circle process of respectful listening did not function and communication between the parties broke down, I had to move out of my role as Circle Keeper and step into the shoes of mediator. This automatically established a hierarchical relationship in the Circle, which I generally did my utmost to avoid, but under rare circumstances, mediation served as a necessary intervention tool. Also, I judged that these were teachable moments when the voice of a responsible adult was needed to calm the heated situation.

Each of the three Circles handled their interpersonal conflicts differently. Only the Circle of Surprise, which I described in Chapter 3, terminated as a result of irreconcilable differences. Once dissolution was clear to everyone, however, they wanted a closing ceremony to honor each other, the Circle process and all they had experienced together. Such closure preserved the Circle's inviolability.

For the Circle of Volatility, in addition to the minor bickering that occurred during the year, there was one major outbreak that lasted several weeks over a boy, threatening the Circle's unity as it split down the middle. This is when I used mediation to get the two impassioned girls to listen and to speak to each other respectfully. Over the three semesters, I asked several times why they wanted to keep their Circle intact since it seemed conflict was erupting more often than naught. The information I gleaned from their interviews indicated that the Circle was a place where they felt personally safe

to “vent” pent up frustrations and, coming from an immigrant culture that suffered greatly from the effects of violence, they wanted to learn a more constructive way of handling their emotions. However, their “bickering” among each other prevented trust building and gradually eroded the internal structure and cohesiveness of the Circle.

The Circle of Social Responsibility was threatened by an interpersonal conflict over a series of misunderstandings, but neither girl was ready to listen to each other when they first attempted to resolve it in the Circle or when I tried mediation. A week later everyone was back in the Circle with the conflict still unresolved, but this time when they reached an impasse, one of the members, LA, assertively took on the role of mediator and focused on what was at stake for all of them. *If the girls did not resolve their conflict, their Circle would break up.* Aware of research about peer-on-peer influence (Barber & Olsen, 1997; Blum, McNeeley, & Rinehart, 2002; Eccles et al., 1997), I stepped out of this interaction, and watched LA express her heartfelt emotions, which ultimately broke the deadlock. The girls resolved their three-week conflict with tears and a group hug (Chapter 3). I am able to write about this sequence of events in hindsight, but at the time, the dynamics were confusing and stressful, especially since we were forced to address this issue within the limited time frame of an hour.

In summary, even though I personally struggled at times with the context of their arguments and keeping centered when the conflicts erupted abruptly, the fact that the girls made an effort to come to the Circle meeting, at potentially great emotional cost, not only spoke to some underlying desire to resolve the conflict, but also to the engaging power of the Circle. Some of the power resided in the structural format; that is, sitting in a circle and using a talking piece, which supported each girl’s voice with respect, fairness

and justice. It also resided in the knowledge that they were surrounded by those who cared, in a collaborative space they helped to create. This combination made them feel safe to be vulnerable and authentic.

In closing, the three challenges I have described—addressing broken rules, such as texting and interrupting, mixing age groups, and handling interpersonal conflict—served as useful learning opportunities for me as the Circle Keeper and, in certain cases, for the students as well. This was especially true when we had to figure out together how to resolve their interpersonal conflicts within the context of the Circle, and when we discussed the issue of respectful listening in terms of texting and interrupting.

### **Theoretical Implications**

#### **Brief summary of theoretical framework.**

When I embarked on this exploratory study, I had only two pieces of evidence to support my intuition about the value of Talking Circles. One was my first hand experience as a practitioner in the field of Restorative Justice and an observer of Peacemaking Circles; the other was the Restorative Practices literature documenting the relevance of Community-Building Circles in school classrooms. The fundamental values and principles of Restorative Justice were the common denominator—speaking and listening respectfully; speaking only when holding the talking piece; speaking from the heart with honesty and compassion; and upholding confidentiality when required.

Positive behavioral changes occurred in both types of Circles even though each served a different purpose. The Peacemaking Circles addressed harm or a misunderstanding *after* it occurred; the classroom Community-Building Circles, which focused on relationships, addressed minor infractions *before* a Peacemaking Circle was

needed. Establishing *connections* between people was the core element in all of the Circles.

At the onset of this project, I could not hold classroom Community-Building Circles since I was not a teacher. I also did not want to introduce Peacemaking Circles to a high school struggling with internal chaos since I could not be assured the agreements Circle participants made for accountability and compensation would be recognized by the administration. As a volunteer outsider, I had little or no decision-making power for following up on such agreements. Since I was intrigued, however, by the positive outcomes of Circle work in the literature and by my own Circle experiences, the idea of creating small out-of-classroom, gender-specific Talking Circles emerged.

Why gender-specific Circles? While reading the literature, I came across alarming reports of increasing rates of teen girls' arrests, higher levels of anxiety and suicide attempts, and the "mean girl" phenomenon. One particular suggestion made by juvenile justice scholar, Chesney-Lind (2004), caught my attention—introduce gender-specific programs in schools to provide appropriate outlets for girls' anger and frustration before they get into trouble with the law. At the same time, I was introduced to the Relational Cultural Theory (Miller, 1976), based on the belief that *connection is the core of human growth and development, and isolation is the primary source of human suffering*. Growth-fostering relationships and building community, and power *with* rather than power *over* were key to understanding the theory. The intersection of the two theories—Restorative Justice and Relational Cultural—inspired me to discover whether the small, intimate, gender-specific Talking Circles could provide a safe space for

building growth-fostering relationships such as those described by Miller and her colleagues (Miller & Stiver, 1997)

### **The Relational Cultural Theory and Talking Circles.**

Findings from this systematic study *corroborates* several key tenets of the Relational Cultural Theory:

1. The adolescent girls developed and nourished growth-fostering relationships in the Talking Circles because they experienced a deep sense of connection and care for each other (Miller & Stiver, 1997). Chapter 4 delineates three positive outcomes of their connection: a) deepening relational bonds; b) feeling safe enough to express authentic emotions; and c) developing capacity for empathy.

2. The empathy and concern that flowed within their mutual relationships affirmed their self-identity, giving many of them a greater sense of purpose and meaning (Jordan, 1991). This allowed them to value diverse perspectives, to reach out to others in need, to not “jump to conclusions” about someone’s behavior, and to strengthen their capacity to care (Chapter 4).

3. The data presented in Chapters 5 and 6 clearly show that the growth-fostering relationships encouraged the development of emotional literacy skills such as improved listening, better management of anger and conflict, and becoming more sensitive to the feelings of others. According to the Relational Cultural Theory, a basic human need is to participate in the growth of others and being open to being moved by others (Jordan & Walker, 2004, p. 5).

In closing, it is illustrative that “the Relational-Cultural Theory emerged out of the relationship of five women—all skilled practitioners, all seeking a better



understanding of their work and experience through their relationships with one another” during weekly meetings in 1977 (West, 2005, p. 97). It is also illustrative that the Talking Circles of similar size met weekly and experienced outcomes compatible with the Relational Cultural Theory that these women developed.

### **Significance of Research**

By grounding the Talking Circles in the Relational Cultural Theory, which promotes *growth-fostering relationships*, and in the values and principles of Restorative Justice and Restorative Practices, which promote *connection, caring and justice*, two theoretical frameworks interconnect. The significance of this research is that the outcomes predicted by both theories actually occurred in the gender-specific Talking Circles. Furthermore, this study corroborates the data presented by the Girls Circles’ Association (2011) which cites the Relational Cultural Theory in their work, and supports the call from scholars to bring this theory into the juvenile justice system to change male-focused policies and procedures (Bloom & Covington, 2001; Covington, 2007; Hossfeld, 2008).

For Kay Pranis, a national leader in Restorative Justice, “The idea of drawing links to some important theories hasn’t necessarily been a part of the conversation to date in our field, especially regarding Circles. This is useful in any field... looking for theoretical structures and patterns that help us understand what is happening” (Personal Communication, July 8, 2012). Since Restorative Practices is a new, flexible and emerging grassroots movement in schools, with a variety of experimentation, these findings are relevant, for both practitioners and theoreticians, in identifying patterns that inform how we refine and operationalize the potential of these Circle processes. There is

genuine need to systematically share current and ongoing learning as the field expands. It is my intention that this research adds to our knowledge base and encourages further dialogue on the implementation and value of Talking Circles as part of a whole-school Restorative Practices program.

### **Statement of Limitations and Future Research**

In this study, I have been able to show that the Talking Circles are conducive to promoting and supporting growth-fostering relationships, as well as encouraging the development of emotional literacy skills. I have stated that I also believe Talking Circles have the potential to serve as a positive and caring environment for releasing emotional tension and anger before they manifest into disruptive behavior and indiscipline. However, the present qualitative research does not allow me to state definitively that the Talking Circles *reduced harmful behavior or the number of suspensions and expulsions from school*, even though both the self-report data and the participant observations suggest they were influential in curbing behavior that might have led to harm.

By incorporating objective measures of behavior into future research, it might be possible to determine if Talking Circles are capable of reducing these negative events. A future study might triangulate school behavioral (truancy, suspensions, expulsions) and academic grade reports, recorded before and after a school year of Talking Circles, with pre- and post- self-report data (semi-structured interviews and surveys) and participant observations. Comparing pre- and post-behavioral measures with the other data would provide an indication of the impact that participation in Talking Circles might have on actual behavioral outcomes.

Another limitation to this study is that the results *cannot be generalized to adolescent boys* since the research focuses only on adolescent female girls, aged 14 to 18. Would Talking Circles with boys obtain the same positive outcomes or do boys interact and communicate differently? Further research could examine this issue by looking at groups of male students organized in Circles of similar size and make-up as those of the girls to see if they also form growth-fostering relationships and develop similar emotional literacy skills. Therefore, to extend the findings of the present research—grounded in participant observations, field notes and interviews—it would be valuable to replicate the current study with male students. Introducing a pre- and post-Circle survey on emotional literacy skills would provide an additional tool for analysis.

It is also unclear from this study whether Talking Circles have the capacity to *change or influence the overall climate of a school*. Again my data suggests that if students have a “safe place” to go each week to connect with friends “who love and care for them,” they will be more connected to and invested in the school. Analysis of climate change, however, would require a large-scale, systematic implementation of gender-specific Talking Circles for *both* boys and girls. The number of students participating would need to be at a level hypothesized to be sufficient for bringing about the desired climate change, based perhaps on a predetermined percentage of the student body population. In addition, the duration of the Talking Circles would need to be long enough to influence the overall school climate, and adults in the schools would need to be trained and actively participating in Restorative Practices to support climate change. Such a study would include a pre- and post-Circle climate survey, as well as semi-structured interviews with both students and staff. Comparisons of pre- and post-Circle

behavioral data for the student body, such as the number of suspensions and expulsions, could also be included.

Finally, this ethnography has focused on the structure and process of Talking Circles as the main elements contributing to the outcomes, but there may be other key drivers of these results; specifically the *nature and presence of the adult Circle Keeper*. That is, in what ways do the presence and, indeed, the nature of the Circle Keeper connect with the outcomes observed? As Circle Keeper, I was someone from the **outside** with **no administrative authority or power** to evaluate the students and since the Circle was voluntary, they always had the option to leave if they did not like the Circle or how I performed in the role of Circle Keeper. To tease apart these effects—that is, to what extent the outcomes are due to the structure, mechanisms and dynamics of the Circle, and to what extent are they related to the nature of the Circle Keeper and what she or he represents to the Circle’s members—the following two studies might be designed.

One possible study would focus on the nature of the Circle Keeper, comparing the outcomes of Circles run by an outside adult, internal adult and internal mature student (such as seniors working with freshmen). If it is more about the process of the Circles and less about who the Circle Keeper is, then outcomes should be similar to those I obtained in this study. Differences between the adult-led groups suggest that the position of the Circle Keeper, relative to the students, influences their experiences. The nature of those differences (more or less improvement) provide insight into how the nature of the relationship of the adult Circle Keeper with the students interacts with their learning. Differences in outcomes between the adult-led versus student-led groups might suggest something else is at play, such as the importance of having an adult and not just the

Circle Keeper per se. This kind of research might determine whether students could be trained to facilitate Circles as they have been trained for peer mediation, or whether an adult who has power within the school system (such as a teacher or staff member) also would be an effective, non-threatening Circle leader. This information has practical value if we want to train future Circle Keepers for school-based Restorative Practices programs.

A second study might attempt to ascertain the influence of an interested outside adult (with a particular style of relating) on the Circle's outcomes. Research suggests that teens today do not have enough positive relationships and experiences with adults to build their lives (Girl Scouts of the United States of America, 1989; Scales, Roehikepartain, & Benson, 2010). Thus, a study might be designed for the adult Circle Keeper to meet individually with a certain number of students for the same amount of time that a Circle meets. Would outcomes differ between those girls who receive individualized attention on a weekly basis, and those who meet with their friends in a weekly Circle led by the same adult Circle Keeper? If it is really about the adult being present with the students in a particular capacity and with a distinct style of relating, then outcomes may be similar for the Circle group and the one-on-one control group. While such a study would not provide data on growth-fostering peer relationships, it could indicate, for instance, the impact that the presence and nature of the adult have on the development of emotional literacy skills. Such research would allow a finer grained analysis of key factors that influence emotional literacy development and might assist in determining the type of Circle Keeper to be trained for school-based Restorative Practices programs.

## Final Words

Intercultural communication scholar, Jacqueline Wasilewski (2005), asks how we can *create a new social space in which we can all be ourselves together*—“a space where nothing exists except ‘Us’ in this moment in time, engaging in this interaction, in this dialogue. ‘Us’ includes you, me, all of our relationships, taking place in our various personal, social, political, cultural, physical and spiritual contexts” (p. 7). Education scholar, Rachel Kessler (2000), asks us to imagine what it would be like “if every student in the United States were provided a safe place to sit with a small group of their peers and reflect on their lives ... to share the questions that trouble or confuse or mystify them... to find support for their pain or joy” (p. 159).

Both Wasilewski (2005) and Kessler (2000) have noted something profound. In essence, how do we co-create safe spaces (in school) in which each person feels comfortable to be exactly who he or she is because they feel honored and respected? I found answers to this question in both the core principles of Restorative Justice and the Relational Cultural Theory, which describes growth-fostering relationships in terms of each person participating in ways that shows concern for and fosters the development of the Other. The crux of that participation is “*being heard and understood as well as hearing and understanding another*” (Miller & Stiver, 1997, p. 19).

In closing, I see the Talking Circles, together with other Restorative Justice and Restorative Practices programs, as a long-term vision, as a potential of what could be manifested in schools across the country for addressing teen disengagement and loneliness; for working with gender-specific issues; for building growth-fostering

relationships grounded in positive values; for teaching and practicing emotional literacy skills; and for introducing the merits of respectful dialogue.

The stirring words of two 15-year old girls—DI (Circle of Surprise) and UE (Circle of Social Responsibility)—attest to the profundity of insights they each discovered in their multi-cultural Circles while *building connections through dialogue*:

UE: *The Circle is about girls coming together and helping each other. Not fighting over this and over that. Because I think if we come together more, then we wouldn't have as many fights as we do. We wouldn't let boys distract us from what we do. If we just came together and just, like, took each other by the hands, and just loved each other enough to not let things like that hurt us, then I think it would turn around the whole school.*  
(UE, IN14, 2011, p. 12)

DI: I think everyone once in their life should do something like this—at least once—because it's like insight into someone else's head and, you know, before you looked at them in a certain way and then after knowing what they go through, you'd be like "Oh, I understand a little bit." I think *that is the problem with the world today, like nobody wants to understand*. Like if we had Circles—this might sound silly—but with different Presidents from different countries and just sat down in like the type of setting like this, and just talked, *I think we'd work things out!*  
(DI, IN2, 2011, p. 5)

Perhaps, we as adults should listen to the wise words of those who are most impacted by the schools today and consider providing the safe spaces that both Wasilewski (2005) and Kessler (2000) envision, and UE and DI have described from their first-hand experience. Education scholar, Nel Noddings (2003a, 2005), was a pioneer in promoting *care and relationships as legitimate and fundamental goals of education*. I contend that Talking Circles, organized in schools, provide a venue for reaching these goals because they tap into the very essence of what it means to be human—to care, to listen, to be heard but most of all to be authentic.

## EPILOGUE

In early September 2011, I was asked by the principal of the high school to continue with the Talking Circles as a consultant rather than as a volunteer. This contract was again renewed for the 2012-2013 academic year. In addition, mediators from a local mediation center, trained as Circle Keepers by the Circle of Congeniality, the Circle of Social Responsibility and by me, are now organizing similar Talking Circles in two other urban high schools. Seeing the benefit of Talking Circles for the girls, the principal in the high school where this study was conducted hired two of the males we trained to facilitate boys' Talking Circles.

The following Circles from 2011-2012 will continue into the 2012-2013 academic year—the Circle of Social Responsibility, the Circle of Playfulness, and the Circle of Congeniality. The Circle of Choices, The Circle of Resilience and the Circle of Diversity all disbanded due to graduation and out-of-district moves. The Circle of Volatility still wants to meet again, as seniors, but this is pending.

The journey into the complex world of teenage girls has touched and changed my life. I will remember their resilience, their vulnerability, their determination, their faith, their authenticity, their caring, but most of all their love. We all grew, some more than others, in knowledge of our own inner resources and capacities and I learned as much from them as they did from each other and me. In fact, even after many more hours of Circle meetings, I still begin each Talking Circle with both reverence and trepidation. Today, I cannot imagine how devoid my life would be of richness and depth if I had not said, “yes,” to this extraordinary project and to their profound *gifts of connection*.



P.S. Recently, the high school was identified as one of our nation’s “failing schools.” This means that it is now under state supervision with a threat of closure or being turned into a charter school if the state approved “transformation model” does not deliver the required academic changes. This is disappointing news since under the leadership of the new principal, the days of mayhem I described in Chapter 2 are gone, teachers and students feel safer, and new programs for improving academic standards and for addressing social concerns, such as the Talking Circles, have been put in place. Only time will tell whether this high school—where over 60% of its student population are English language learners (ELL) and nearly 90% qualify for free or reduced price lunches—will be able to remain a public school, serving the impoverished community in which it resides and supporting such programs as the Talking Circles.

## APPENDIX A

*Notes taken during Circle meetings (CN)*

(1) Circle of  
Surprise

(2) Circle of  
Silence

(3) Circle of  
Congeniality

Data #	Date		Data #	Date		Data #	Date
CN1/1	2/17/2010		CN2/1	9/24/2010		CN3/1	10/6/2010
CN1/2	3/3/2010		CN2/2	9/29/2010		CN3/2	10/27/2010
CN1/3	3/17/2010		CN2/3	10/7/2010		CN3/3	11/3/2010
CN1/4	4/1/2010		CN2/4	10/28/2010		CN3/4	11/10/2010
CN1/5	4/15/2010		CN2/5	11/4/2010		CN3/5	11/17/2010
CN1/6	4/22/2010		CN2/6	11/11/2010		CN3/6	12/2/2010
CN1/7	4/28/2010		CN2/7	11/18/2010		CN3/7	12/8/2010
CN1/8	5/5/2010		CN2/8	12/2/2010		CN3/8	12/15/2010
CN1/9	5/12/2010		CN2/9	12/9/2010		CN3/9	1/5/2011
CN1/10	5/20/2010		CN2/10	12/16/2010		CN3/10	1/12/2011
CN1/11	5/27/2010		CN2/11	1/5/2011		CN3/11	1/26/2011
CN1/12	6/3/2010		CN2/12	1/13/2011		CN3/12	2/9/2011
CN1/13	6/9/2010		CN2/13	1/27/2011		CN3/13	2/16/2011
CN1/14	9/15/2010		CN2/14	2/10/2011		CN3/14	3/9/2011
CN1/15	9/24/2010		CN2/15	3/10/2011		CN3/15	3/16/2011
			CN2/16	3/17/2011		CN3/16	3/23/2011
			CN2/17	3/31/2011		CN3/17	3/30/2011
			CN2/18	4/7/2011		CN3/18	4/6/2011
			CN2/19	4/27/2011		CN3/19	4/13/2011
			CN2/20	5/18/2011		CN3/20	5/4/2011
			CN2/21	5/18/2011		CN3/21	5/11/2011
			CN2/22	5/26/2011		CN3/22	5/25/2011
			CN2/23	5/28/2011		CN3/23	6/8/2011
			CN2/24	6/8/2011		CN3/24	11/3/11
						CN3/25	11/12/11
						CN3/26	12/14/11

(4) Circle of  
Social Responsibility(5) Circle of  
Diversity(6) Circle of  
Playfulness

Data #	Date		Data #	Date		Data #	Date
CN4/1	11/3/2010		CN5/1	11/18/2010		CN6/1	11/24/2010
CN4/2	11/10/2010		CN5/2	12/2/2010		CN6/2	11/18/2010
CN4/3	11/17/2010		CN5/3	12/9/2010		CN6/3	12/8/2010
CN4/4	12/1/2010		CN5/4	12/16/2010		CN6/4	12/15/2010
CN4/5	12/15/2010		CN5/5	1/6/2011		CN6/5	1/5/2011
CN4/6	1/5/2011		CN5/6	1/13/2011		CN6/6	1/12/2011
CN4/7	1/12/2011		CN5/7	1/27/2011		CN6/7	1/26/2011
CN4/8	1/19/2011		CN5/8	2/10/2011		CN6/8	2/9/2011
CN4/9	1/26/2011		CN5/9	3/10/2011		CN6/9	2/16/2011
CN4/10	2/9/2011		CN5/10	3/17/2011		CN6/10	3/9/2011
CN4/11	2/16/2011		CN5/11	3/31/2011		CN6/11	3/16/2011
CN4/12	3/9/2011		CN5/12	4/7/2011		CN6/12	3/23/2011
CN4/13	3/16/2011		CN5/13	4/14/2011		CN6/13	3/30/2011
CN4/14	3/24/2011		CN5/14	4/28/2011		CN6/14	4/7/2011
CN4/15	3/30/2011		CN5/15	5/4/2011		CN6/15	4/13/2011
CN4/16	4/5/2011		CN5/16	5/19/2011		CN6/16	4/27/2011
CN4/17	4/13/2011		CN5/17	6/9/2011		CN6/17	5/4/2011
CN4/18	4/27/2011					CN6/18	5/10/2011
CN4/19	5/4/2011					CN6/19	5/18/2011
CN4/20	5/18/2011					CN6/20	5/25/2011
CN4/21	6/8/2011					CN6/21	5/18/2011
CN4/22	9/20/2011					CN6/22	6/8/2011
CN4/23	9/27/2011					CN6/23	9/20/2011
CN4/24	10/5/2011					CN6/24	9/27/2011
CN4/25	10/11/2011					CN6/25	10/4/2011
CN4/26	10/18/2011					CN6/26	10/11/2011
CN4/27	10/26/2011					CN6/27	10/18/2011
CN4/28	11/1/2011					CN6/28	11/1/2011
CN4/29	11/15/2011					CN6/29	11/15/2011
CN4/30	11/29/2011					CN6/30	11/22/2011
CN4/31	12/6/2011					CN6/31	11/29/2011
CN4/32	12/13/2011					CN6/32	12/6/2011
						CN6/33	12/13/2011

(7) Circle of  
Volatility(8) Circle of  
Resilience(9) Circle of  
Choices

Data #	Date		Data #	Date		Data #	Date
CN7/1	11/31/2010		CN8/1	3/29/2011		CN9/1	11/9/2010
CN7/2	12/7/2010		CN8/2	4/6/2011		CN9/2	11/18/2010
CN7/3	12/16/2010		CN8/3	4/13/2011		CN9/3	11/31/2010
CN7/4	1/4/2011		CN8/4	4/27/2011		CN9/4	12/7/2010
CN7/5	1/11/2011		CN8/5	5/4/2011		CN9/5	12/16/2010
CN7/6	1/25/2011		CN8/6	5/10/2011		CN9/6	1/4/2011
CN7/7	2/1/2011		CN8/7	5/18/2011		CN9/7	1/12/2011
CN7/8	2/8/2011		CN8/8	5/25/2011		CN9/8	1/25/2011
CN7/9	2/15/2011		CN8/9	6/8/2011		CN9/9	2/1/2011
CN7/10	3/8/2011		CN8/10	9/22/2011		CN9/10	2/8/2011
CN7/11	3/16/2011		CN8/11	9/27/2011		CN9/11	2/15/2011
CN7/12	3/29/2011		CN9/12	10/6/2011		CN9/12	3/8/2011
CN7/13	4/5/2011		CN9/13	10/13/2011		CN9/13	3/16/2011
CN7/14	4/12/2011		CN9/14	10/20/2011		CN9/14	3/29/2011
CN7/15	4/26/2011		CN9/15	10/27/2011		CN9/15	4/5/2011
CN7/16	5/3/2011		CN9/16	11/1/2011		CN9/16	4/12/2011
CN7/17	5/10/2011		CN9/17	11/10/2011		CN9/17	5/3/2011
CN7/18	5/17/2011		CN9/18	12/1/2011		CN9/18	5/10/2011
CN7/19	6/7/2011		CN9/19	12/8/2011		CN9/19	5/17/2011
CN7/20	9/20/2011		CN9/20	12/15/2011		CN9/20	6/7/2011
CN7/21	9/27/2011						
CN7/22	10/4/2011						
CN7/23	10/11/2011						
CN7/24	10/18/2011						
CN7/25	10/25/2011						
CN7/26	11/1/2011						
CN7/27	11/15/2011						
CN7/28	11/23/2011						
CN7/29	11/30/2011						
CN7/30	12/6/2011						
CN7/31	12/13/2011						

## APPENDIX B

## Field Notes (FN)

Data #	Date		Data #	Date
FN1	12/7/2009		FN35	9/22/2010
FN2	1/19/2010		FN36	9/23/2010
FN3	2/2/2010		FN37	10/2/2010
FN4	2/3/2010		FN38	10/3/2010
FN5	2/4/2010		FN39	10/9/2010
FN6	2/9/2010		FN40	10/10/2010
FN7	2/11/2010		FN41	10/11/2010
FN8	2/17/2010		FN42	10/12/2010
FN9	2/23/2010		FN43	10/15/2010
FN10	3/3/2010		FN44	10/18/2010
FN11	3/21/2010		FN45	10/27/2010
FN12	3/22/2010		FN46	11/8/2010
FN13	3/23/2010		FN47	11/10/2010
FN14	3/25/2010		FN48	11/11/2010
FN15	3/28/2010		FN49	11/12/2010
FN16	3/30/2010		FN50	11/14/2010
FN17	4/1/2010		FN51	11/15/2010
FN18	4/5/2010		FN52	11/20/2010
FN19	4/6/2010		FN53	12/1/2010
FN20	4/12/2010		FN54	12/2/2010
FN21	4/13/2010		FN55	12/8/2010
FN22	4/14/2010		FN56	1/5/2011
FN23	4/15/2010		FN57	1/11/2011
FN24	4/16/2010		FN58	1/15/2011
FN25	4/20/2010		FN59	1/25/2011
FN26	5/26/2010		FN60	1/30/2011
FN27	5/27/2010		FN61	2/2/2011
FN28	6/9/2010		FN62	2/10/2011
FN29	8/18/2010		FN63	4/30/2011
FN30	8/26/2010		FN64	5/3/2011
FN31	8/27/2010		FN65	5/17/2011
FN32	9/14/2010		FN66	4/20/2012
FN33	9/20/2010		FN67	4/26/2012
FN34	9/21/2010		FN68	5/2/2012

## APPENDIX C

*Interviews with students, gatekeepers and staff (IN)*

Students

Staff and Focus Group

Data #	Name	Date		Data #	Name	Date
IN1	NE	1/25/2011		IN32	Vice Principal (VP1)	1/25/2010
IN2	DI	1/26/2011		IN33	Staff (TU)	3/17/2010
IN3	MA	2/8/2011		IN34	Teacher (MA)	5/4/2010
IN4	IM	2/9/2011		IN35	Staff (SO)	6/29/2011
IN5	HE	3/8/2011		IN36	Teacher (KR)	8/4/2011
IN6	MI	3/10/2011		IN37	Vice Principal (VP2)	6/15/2011
IN7	TA	3/15/2011		IN38	Principal (PR)	5/15/2011
IN8	AM	3/17/2011				
IN9	TR	3/23/2011		IN39	Focus Group: Circle of Surprise	5/20/2010
IN10	NA	3/29/2011		IN40	Focus Group: A	5/25/2010
IN11	LA	3/30/2011		IN41	Focus Group: C	5/26/2010
IN12	SH	3/31/2011		IN42	Focus Group: E	6/2/2010
IN13	CA	4/5/2011				
IN14	UE	4/6/2011				
IN15	GE	4/11/2011				
IN16	ER	4/12/2011				
IN17	RI	4/14/2011				
IN18	NA	4/15/2011				
IN19	DN & AJ	4/26/2011				
IN20	LU	4/27/2011				
IN21	DA & UM	4/28/2011				
IN22	EL	5/3/2011				
IN23	AR	5/9/2011				
IN24	IA	5/10/2011				
IN25	YA	5/17/2011				
IN26	EE	5/19/2011				
IN27	RA	5/19/2011				
IN28	IY	5/26/2011				
IN29	ON & IE	6/8/2011				
IN30	GA	5/14/2012				
IN31	VE	5/2/2012				

*APPENDIX D**Sample of Semi-structured Interview Questions for Students*

1. Describe what it is like for you to come to the Circle each week.
2. What do you think is the purpose of the Circle?
3. What have you learned about yourself in the Circle?
4. What have you learn from others?
5. Describe how coming to the Circle may have helped you.
6. Describe whether the Circle has made a difference in your feelings about coming to school.
7. Describe whether and how the Circle might have helped you deal with stress.
8. Describe whether you have learned anything about dealing with conflict from being in the Circle.
9. Is there any way you have changed in handling conflict?
10. Describe whether and if so, how the Circle has helped you manage anger.
11. Describe how the Circle helped or did not help you in expressing your ideas and feelings.
12. How important is it to be in a Circle with all girls?
13. How important is having an adult in the Circles?
14. How important were the reflective questions I asked each week during our “topic of the day?”
15. Describe your thoughts on the opening ceremonies at the beginning of the Circle.
16. Describe how you felt about using the ball as a talking piece each week and what you see as its purpose.

17. Describe whether you think Circles are beneficial for students.
18. What will you remember about the Circle?
19. Is there anything you would like to change about the Circle?
20. What impact did the Circles have on your life outside of school?



## APPENDIX E

**WAYNE STATE  
UNIVERSITY**


HUMAN INVESTIGATION COMMITTEE  
101 East Alexandrine Building  
Detroit, Michigan 48201  
Phone: (313) 577-1628  
FAX: (313) 993-7122  
<http://hic.wayne.edu>




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**NOTICE OF EXPEDITED APPROVAL**

**To:** Martha Schumacher  
Communication

**From:** Ellen Barton, Ph.D.   
Chairperson, Behavioral Institutional Review Board (B3)

**Date:** January 05, 2010

**RE:** HIC #: 126209B3E  
Protocol Title: Restorative Practice: A Conflict Management and Leadership Training Approach in Multi-Ethnic Urban Schools

Sponsor:  
Protocol #: 0912007838

**Expiration Date:** January 04, 2011

**Risk Level / Category:** 45 CFR 46.404 - Research not involving greater than minimal risk

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The above-referenced protocol and items listed below (if applicable) were **APPROVED** following *Expedited Review* (Category 7\*) by the Chairperson/designee for the Wayne State University Behavioral Institutional Review Board (B3) for the period of 01/05/2010 through 01/04/2011. This approval does not replace any departmental or other approvals that may be required.

- Elementary School Parental Permission/Information Sheet
  - Elementary School Teacher Information Sheet (dated 1/4/10)
  - Elementary School Assent Form and Oral Consent
  - Teen Assent Form (dated 1/4/10)
  - High School Parental Permission/Information Sheet (dated 1/4/10)
  - High School Teacher Information Sheet (dated 1/4/10)
- 

- Federal regulations require that all research be reviewed at least annually. You may receive a "Continuation Renewal Reminder" approximately two months prior to the expiration date; however, it is the Principal Investigator's responsibility to obtain review and continued approval **before** the expiration date. Data collected during a period of lapsed approval is unapproved research and can **never** be reported or published as research data.
- All changes or amendments to the above-referenced protocol require review and approval by the HIC **BEFORE** implementation.
- Adverse Reactions/Unexpected Events (AR/UE) must be submitted on the appropriate form within the timeframe specified in the HIC Policy (<http://www.hic.wayne.edu/hicpol.html>).

**NOTE:**

1. Upon notification of an impending regulatory site visit, hold notification, and/or external audit the HIC office must be contacted immediately.
2. Forms should be downloaded from the HIC website at **each** use.

\*Based on the Expedited Review List, revised November 1998

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**ABSTRACT****TALKING CIRCLES FOR ADOLESCENT GIRLS  
IN AN URBAN HIGH SCHOOL: A RESTORATIVE PRACTICES PROGRAM  
FOR BUILDING FRIENDSHIPS AND DEVELOPING  
EMOTIONAL LITERACY SKILLS**

by

**MARTHA ANN SCHUMACHER****December 2012****Advisor:** Dr. Loraleigh Keashly**Major:** Communication**Degree:** Doctor of Philosophy

Restorative Practices and Restorative Justice programs in schools are a new and emerging field. Meeting in Circles to build community, resolve conflict, and learn interactively are core components of these programs. This ethnographic study, which took place February 2010 to December 2011, evaluates 12 small, out-of-classroom Talking Circles for 60 adolescent girls as part of a Restorative Practices program in an urban high school. The primary data source are participant observations of the weekly Talking Circles and semi-structured interviews with 31 of the students involved in the Circles. The Talking Circles were grounded in the theoretical frameworks of both the Relational Cultural Theory, which promotes growth-fostering relationships, and Restorative Justice, which promotes connection, caring and justice. Four relational themes emerged in the study: a) joy of being together and building friendships; b) feeling safe with each other; c) being free to express genuine emotions; and d) cultivating empathy. Evidence of emotional literacy development included a) improved capacity to listen; b) better management of anger and conflict situations; and c) becoming more

sensitive to others. The findings demonstrate that the Talking Circle provided a safe space to nurture *growth-fostering relationships* as described by the Relational Cultural Theory; growth-fostering relationships supported the development of *emotional literacy skills*, which led to *personal power*; personal empowerment gave rise to *self-efficacy*. It appears this type of out-of-classroom Circle addresses some of the psychosocial and emotional needs of students that are not met in other school venues, and may provide a tool for addressing teen disengagement and loneliness; for working with gender-specific issues; for teaching and practicing emotional literacy skills; and for introducing the merits of respectful dialogue.

## **AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT**

Ann Schumacher, trained in Restorative Practices and as a facilitator of Talking and Peacemaking Circles in schools, teaches young people how to build community and manage conflict without violence. She is also a trained mediator in Restorative Justice for the civil courts and two local mediation centers. Her broad research interests lie in the field of peace and conflict studies with a focus on Restorative Justice in the juvenile court system, Restorative Practices in schools, and leadership and power issues for adolescent girls. She is a World Peace Fellow honored by Rotary International in Bangkok, Thailand.

Prior to a career change to Restorative Justice and Restorative Practices, she worked 13 years in former Yugoslavia as a translator and artist. Upon her return to the United States, Schumacher graduated from the Cranbrook Academy of Art with an MFA degree and became an accomplished artist who exhibited widely both nationally and internationally. She held the position of Associate Professor of Art and Design at Berea College, in Berea, Kentucky. During that tenure, she received a Fulbright-Hays Research Fellowship, an American Institute of Indian Studies Research Fellowship, and an Indo-American Sub-Commission Research Fellowship to conduct research on the culture and arts of India. She also holds a MA degree in International Relations and East European Studies from George Washington University; a MA degree in Dispute Resolution from Wayne State University; and a one-year training certificate from the International Trauma Studies Program at Columbia University. Her work today with Talking Circles in multi-ethnic urban schools represents an integration of her life long interests in education, peace activism, world cultures and the arts.