Peer Experiences among Black and Hispanic Adolescent Girls in a Sport Based Youth Development Setting

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Nneka Arinze, PhD

The University of Connecticut 2019

ABSTRACT

Black and Hispanic adolescent girls are among those with the highest risks for physical inactivity. Previous research has demonstrated the importance of peer support in influencing their participation in physical activity. However, little research has addressed the ways in which the peer relationships in sport-based youth development (SBYD) programs influence adolescents’ participation and engagement choices. The purpose of this study was to explore the peer experiences of Black and Hispanic adolescent girls in a school-based SBYD program and the influences on their participation and engagement behaviors.

Using a case study design, I looked at the role of the greater school environment, peers, and adults. Six adolescent members and seven adult leaders of the focus SBYD program took part in this study. Data were collected through a combination of participant-created sociograms, interviews, and participant observations and analyzed using thematic analysis. This work was informed by intersectionality (Collins, 2015), the SBYD framework (Perkins & Noam, 2007), the framework of peer experiences (Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 2006), and the peer influence model (Brown, Bakken, Ameringer, & Mahon, 2008).

The findings of this research centered on eight themes and indicate the intertwined nature of the school context and the program: the greater school climate of low expectations and
aggression, surveillance, obstruction, relationship issues, an ego-oriented climate, adult involvement, and perceptions of the program overall. Study is significant because of the focus on greater environment surrounding the program, the focus on the interconnections on a singular SBYD group, and the addition it makes to the literature with the voices of Black and Hispanic girls.

Keywords: sport-based youth development, Black and Hispanic adolescent girls, physical activity, peer relationships, peer influence
Peer Experiences among Black and Hispanic Adolescent Girls in a

Sport Based Youth Development Setting

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APPROVAL PAGE

Doctor of Philosophy Dissertation

Peer Experiences among Black and Hispanic Adolescent Girls in a Sport Based Youth Development Setting

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[2019]
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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

In 2018, the U.S. was awarded the grade of D- for the proportion of youth meeting the physical activity guidelines. Among twelve to fifteen-year-old adolescents, just 7.5% met the recommended sixty or more minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity at least five days per week (National Physical Activity Plan Alliance, 2018). Additionally, girls are less likely than boys to participate in sport or in physical activity. 17.7% of girls are physically inactive, while just 10% of boys report inactivity (Go, Mozaffarian, Roger, Benjamin, Berry, Borden, Bravata, et al, 2013). While there is a great disparity along gender lines, that disparity grows when race is added. 13.7% of White girls are inactive, whereas 26.7% and 21.3% of Black and Hispanic girls are inactive, respectively (Go et al, 2013). The general decline in activity as youth age is higher among girls than boys as well (Lenhart, Patterson, Brown, O’Brien, & Nelson, 2014; Rew, Arheart, Horner, Thompson, & Johnson, 2015), and becomes most significant in grades 6 and 8 (Lenhart, et al., 2014).

Further data from the National Heart Lung and Blood Institute Growth and Health Study support that the decline in activity is exacerbated by both gender and race (Kimm, Glynn, Kriska, Barton, Kronsberg, Daniels, & Liu, 2002). The study followed 1,213 Black and 1,166 White girls from the ages of nine and ten to eighteen and nineteen in the Cincinnati and San Francisco areas. The greatest declines in activity occurred between ages thirteen and fourteen. While Black girls had lower activity levels than White girls in all years, this gap only increased with age (Kimm et al., 2002).

Coinciding with the age of peak declines in activity, Dishman, Dunn, Salli, Vadenberg, and Pratt (2010) found adolescent girls reported fewer social supports for physical activity. The
evidence of declining social supports is especially noteworthy as adolescents in focus groups prioritized support as the most important factor encouraging their participation in physical activity, second only to perceived resources for activity in the school and community (Baskin, Dulin-Keita, Thind, & Godsey, 2015). In this same set of focus groups, girls, more so than boys, specifically emphasized that pressure from their social networks was of high importance in terms of encouraging their activity behaviors (Baskin et al., 2015).

Quantitative surveys focusing on girls specifically have found social support from friends to be a significant predictor of physical activity levels among Black\(^1\), Hispanic, and White girls in multiple studies (Kelly, Parra-Medina, Pfeiffer, Dowda, Conway, Webber, & Jobe, 2010; Lenhart et al., 2014; Dishman, et al., 2010). In a sample of 305 urban-dwelling girls (38.7% Black, 47% Hispanic) between the ages of twelve and twenty-one, those girls who reported that most or all of their friends exercised were more likely to report regular vigorous physical activity themselves (Saxena, Borzekowski & Rickert, 2002). Benes, Dowling, Crawford, and Hayman, (2017) found peer support led to a 2.9 times greater likelihood for Hispanic girls to meet recommendations for moderately vigorous physical activity. It is important to note however that the variable of peer support was measured based on the number of extracurricular activities the girl participated in. This means that previous research involving peer support is based in broad and varying definitions of the term.

Based on these findings, Kelly and colleagues (2010) supported the need for interventions to emphasize participation of friend groups together and the need for supportive

\(^1\)In this document, there will be varying use of the terms Black and African-American. This will reflect the usage of the cited author. However, my chosen terminology will be Black to encompass descent from all points of the African Diaspora. The term Hispanic will be used to denote those with heritage from Spanish speaking countries and territories. The use of the term mirrors the ways in which the participants and their community refer to their ethnicity. I am honoring their usage by adopting the same term.
adults. Baskin and colleagues (2015) suggest that efforts to encourage African-American girls’ physical activity should center on enhancing supportive social networks and activities should involve teamwork. Understanding the role of peers may prove useful in better understanding the continuance and decline in physical activity among girls, especially those who are Black and/or Hispanic.

**Problem Statement**

Black and Hispanic girls are at heightened risk for becoming inactive as they age (McClain et al., 2011). The age of this decline coincides with the age at which friends and peers become more influential in the participation of girls in physical activity. Support from friends increases the likelihood that girls will be physically active, while lack of support from friends and peers makes it much more likely that girls will be inactive.

Sport based youth development (SBYD) programs provide opportunities for traditionally inactive, underserved youth to engage in sport and physical activity (Youth Sports Collaborative Network, 2017). in particular, girls who participate in SBYD programs reap wide ranging benefits, including the socioemotional, mental, and physical well-being (LaVoi, Strong, Pearson, Skeen, Bruening, & Lerner, 2009). These programs are of particularly of interest because they are guided by a framework which encourages creating supportive environments (Perkins & Noam, 2007). Thus, the environments of these programs align with suggestions from researchers (see Kelly et al., 2010; Baskin et al., 2015) as to how to best improve physical activity among Black and Hispanic girls.

In the SBYD framework, the supportive context is created as a result of both youth-adult and peer to peer relationships (Perkins & Noam, 2007). However, the vast majority of studies focus on the adult-youth relationship. Previous research has not adequately addressed the role of
peer relationships in these settings. Because of the known importance of social support, particularly from friends and peers, in encouraging girls’ physical activity, research is needed to better understand the nature of the peer context in such programs. In particular, research is lacking on how the peer environment influences the physical activity participation of Black and Hispanic early adolescent girls, who are most likely to be physically inactive.

**Statement of Purpose**

Knowledge from said research will aid in understanding factors that encourage this population to remain engaged in physical activity. Additionally, a better understanding of the peer context will aid practitioners in developing and maintaining inviting environments for participants. The purpose of this study, therefore, was to explore Black and Hispanic adolescent girls’ peer experiences within a SBYD program and the influence of those experiences on participation and engagement.
CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

Peer Experiences in SBYD Programs

There is some evidence that the environment of SBYD programs shape peer interactions (see Gould, Flett, & Lauer, 2012; Ullrich-French, McDonough, & Smith, 2012). The perception of caring and mastery motivational climates were linked with greater perceptions of positive outcomes as reported by 239 participants in a study of the Think Detroit Police Athletic League (Gould et al., 2012). The creation of an ego-oriented achievement environment, that is one with a focus on comparison to others and winning, was associated with more negative peer interactions and experiences with adults (Gould et al., 2012). This suggests that adult intentionality in shaping the program norms may also shape peer experiences and interactions among youth in the program (Gould et al., 2012). Further, youth perceptions of support from adult leaders may also predict their increase in social competence and thus their peer relationships (Ullrich-French et al., 2012).

Interview data findings from McDonough, Ullrich-French, and McDavid (2018) allowed youth participants to identify specific elements that influenced their peer relationships. The youth pointed to factors that made it easier to form prosocial relationships with peers (e.g., when others were nice, opportunities to spend time with each other in fun activities, and introduction techniques taught by the staff) which helped them avoid trouble and feel respected. Barriers to relationships included teasing and exclusive cliques. Staff helped the youth by providing opportunities to improve social skills, fostering a sense of inclusion, and encouraging participation. However, they could further alienate youth by modeling teasing behavior, granting license to participants to do the same and further alienating the youth (McDonough et al., 2018).
In previous research, members of an afterschool SBYD program for provided their perceptions of aspects of their program environment that shaped their relationships with their peers. Members spoke to their perceptions of each other, discussing what each girl contributed to the group dynamic (Bruening, Dover, & Clark, 2009). Participants acknowledged that some were swayed by their peers to misbehave, indicating the influence of others on their behavior. Overall the biggest motivators to participate in the program were having fun with staff and peers and the sense of belonging they felt (Bruening et al., 2009). In the studies cited, there is some evidence that the norms and expectations of programs, created primarily by adults, shape the nature of peer interactions. In particular the use of character-building activities, opportunities to form relationships, and guidance from staff were instrumental to the participants interviewed by McDonough and colleagues (2018). While these studies have made some mention of the role of peers specifically in this regard, a study of peer experiences as they relate to participation in physical activity is largely lacking in SBYD literature. Though participants spoke to the positive and negative aspects of the relationships they formed with peers (McDonough et al., 2018; Bruening et al., 2009), there is little evidence as to how these peer experiences shape engagement in programming.

**Peer Experiences in Positive Youth Development Programs**

Studies of urban positive youth development organizations provide more evidence regarding the importance of relationships and belonging. These programs supplement this review of literature with information that specific to urban and Black and Hispanic youths’ perceptions of peers within similar youth development contexts. Boys and Girls Club settings provided additional findings regarding the importance of peer relationships within the youth development space (see Fredricks, Hackett, & Bregman, 2010). Members listed friends and fun as their
reasons for coming to the club. The club allowed them opportunities to spend time with their friends outside of the school setting and to meet new peers they would not have met ordinarily (Fredricks et al., 2010). Girls specifically indicated that they enjoyed hanging with club peers and their relationships with group members were salient (Loder & Hirsch, 2003). They saw the club as an environment where they could express themselves and form relationships because they were unable talk to each other in class and had limited opportunity for cross grade interactions at school (Loder & Hirsch, 2003). Their peer relationships were noted as being a form of social support, with friends acting as a calming influence when members were upset or as someone who could cheer them up. However, peers could have a negative influence by teasing, though friends could serve as defenders and supports in these situations. as well. Teasing and the absence of friends were reasons for not coming to the program (Fredricks, Hackett, & Bregman, 2010).

Youth in other after school programs have also highlighted the importance of relatedness in their program experiences (Bulanda & McCrea, 2013). Stand Up Help Out (SUHO) was an adolescent leadership development program for African-American youth residing in lower socioeconomic status neighborhoods in the Chicago area. Participants developed positive peer relationships in sharing circles where they discussed personal experiences and felt a sense of trust and empathy from their peers. They also spoke of expressing care themselves, which helped them to form connections and feel valued and respected. Staff cultivated this environment by providing participants with the freedom to be themselves and setting the stage for vulnerability. As such, the main value noted of the program was the relationships which created a more meaningful experience (Bulanda & McCrea, 2013).
Students at an urban afterschool center contrasted groups at the center with those at the school (Strobel, Kirshner, O’Donoghue, & McLaughlin, 2008). Relationships among peers at the center tended to be more positive whereas there was more fighting and disrespect at the school. The authors noted relationships at the center may have been more positive because the youth invited their friends to the center, which may have been the reason they were able to get along better (Strobel et al., 2008).

**Peer Experiences in Sport and Physical Activity**

Studies focused on general physical activity and sport spaces have provided more input into how peer experiences shape adolescent physical activity behavior. In particular, friendship has emerged in qualitative studies as a positive influence on adolescent girls’ physical activity behavior (Casey, Eime, Payne, & Harvey, 2009; Yungblut, Schinke, & McGannon, 2012). Seventh grade Australian girls noted the importance of friends in that they could support physical activity participation (Casey et al., 2009). Canadian adolescent girls noted that they were more likely to try activities with their friends (Yungblut et al., 2012). Having a friend present helped girls to feel more confident about their abilities and less self-conscious (Yungblut et al., 2012).

While having friends in the activity may help encourage participation, the lack of friends in the space may discourage participation. Australian adolescent girls interviewed via focus groups by Slater and Tiggeman (2010) noted that girls quit sport in order to spend more time with friends or due to the pressure to conform to the behaviors of girls who were not in the group or on the team. Strained relationships within the activity, due to exclusionary behaviors such as clique formation, may also discourage participation. This conflict included teasing and bullying but also a feeling that the girl was not a part of the group (Slater & Tiggeman, 2010).
Bullying was often cited as a barrier to participation (see Casey et al., 2016; Slater & Tiggeman, 2010; Hills, 2007). Interviews with midwestern sixth grade students revealed that bullying in physical education (PE) classes led students to withdraw from the activity or avoid entering locker rooms (O’Connor & Graber, 2013). PE class itself was a space for bullies to practice antagonistic behaviors such as targeting victims during dodgeball. Such forms of relational aggression can lead to increased popularity for girls by helping them control peers and enhance their personal status and popularity (Smetana, Campione-Barr, & Metzger, 2006). Hills (2007) noted that these behaviors not only exclude those targeted but are also used as a means to organize peer status. In observations of twelve and thirteen-year-old girls in England, PE classes were spaces for exclusion, primarily of the physically less competent and those who fell outside of the dominant friend group. Because physical competence was a means of gaining status, the risk of appearing physically incompetent shaped participation choices. Girls were mindful of those activities where the focus was placed on individual players at a time and preferred those activities where individual mistakes were not as evident (Hills, 2007).

A fear of surveillance by others, of being watched, and of judgment from peers were given as reasons for opting out of physical activity in interviews with 138 Australian female students between the ages of fourteen and sixteen (Casey et al., 2016). In this study, those girls with low physical activity levels were those who cited these concerns most often, in addition to embarrassment and teasing. Further the perceived judgement extended beyond the activity itself as the girls were also concerned about their bodies’ appearance being on greater display due to the uniform (Casey et al., 2016). However, support from friends can ease adolescent girls’ fear of surveillance and support their participation (Yungblut et al., 2012). This type of support
helped ease the fear of participating in front of their peers, due in particular, to the fear of being negatively assessed by peers and teachers.

In summary, these studies speak to the encouragement from friends as a positive influence on participation behavior (Casey et al., 2009; Yungblut et al., 2012), the negative impact of exclusionary and antagonistic behaviors (see Casey et al., 2016; Slater & Tiggeman, 2010; Hills, 2007; O’Connor & Graber, 2013) and the role of surveillance in shaping behavior (Casey et al., 2016; Yungblut et al., 2012; Hills, 2007). While this research is helpful in furthering knowledge as to peer experiences in sport and physical activity, it is limited in the adolescents studied. These studies dealt with primarily White populations, and in some cases Australian (see Casey et al., 2009; Slater & Tiggeman, 2010) or British (see Hills, 2007) youth. Though it may be possible that these studies’ findings may translate to Black and Hispanic girls in the U.S., ethnic backgrounds provide contexts for the cultural norms which shape social interactions (Brown & Larson, 2009). As such identity markers such as race, culture, and gender may shape adolescents’ values and expectations for their peer experiences (Brown & Larson, 2009). As Rubin, Bukowksi, and Parker (2006) write “researchers would do well not to generalize findings drawn from children of one cultural group to children from another context (p. 612).” Instead, the distinct sociocultural identities of adolescents should be accounted for as they shape those adolescents’ perceptions and performances of behaviors in that environment (Rubin, et al., 2006). As such, in order to better understand the peer experiences of Black and Hispanic girls in sport and physical activity, researchers should investigate potential influences on their physical activity in settings particular to these girls.
Conceptual Framework

Intersectionality

The need to focus on the raced and gendered identities of Black and Hispanic girls in a way that is specific to their context falls directly in line with the theory of intersectionality. Originally, the theory was framed in Black feminism and promoted the importance of recognizing Black women’s experiences of both racism and sexism, which were often eclipsed by those of Black men and White women respectively (Combahee River Collective, 2014). As a result of these multiplied oppressions, focusing solely on the effects of race or sex as a key variable shaping experience is insufficient (Collins, 2011). Individuals’ multiple identities intersect to influence the ways in which they experience the world (Collins, 2015). Intersectionality as a framework allows for the recognition that the effects of one social identity category cannot be isolated from the experiences due to other identity categories (May, 2015). Though the theory has roots in Black feminism, its use has since expanded to investigate the experiences of women and men from varying ethnicities and national origins, sexualities, and levels of ability (Carbado, Crenshaw, Mays, & Tomlinson, 2013).

In research, one use of intersectionality is to gain better understanding of social problems that are underpinned by the relations between identity categories (Collins, 2015). Such work should be guided by the assumption that individuals and groups operate in social systems and are subjected to social inequalities that are culturally and historically specific (Collins, 2015). As such this framework guided my focus on the specific contexts of the Black and Hispanic adolescent girls. It encourages the view that Black and Hispanic adolescent girls have experiences as a result of both their race and gender that cannot be assumed to be accounted for in literature that predominantly focuses on White girls.
Intersectionality as a framework places a spotlight on the raced and gendered experiences which likely shape the physical activity participation choices of Black and Hispanic girls. In and of itself, it does not provide a pointed lens through which to analyze those experiences. For that reason, additional frameworks were necessary to fully explore the peer experiences of these girls in the SBYD setting. These three frameworks are sport-based youth development, peer experiences, and the peer influence process.

**Sport Based Youth Development**

Sport based youth development (SBYD) programs serve as important potential avenues to support the physical activity of Black and Hispanic girls. As such, they form an important context for this study. SBYD programs are based on the characteristics of positive youth development theory, which posits that youth develop best when provided the necessary context for growth (Perkins & Noam, 2007; Lerner, 2005). The focus is not so much on the physical resources at the adolescent’s disposal but more so on the relationships and people in her life (Benson, 2002).

There are five assets (5Cs) that should be maximized for positive youth development: caring and compassion, character, competence, confidence, and connection (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Lerner’s (2005) two hypotheses build upon this asset list to explain the conditions for positive youth development. The first is that aligning youth with the proper context will encourage their positive development. The second hypothesis states that positive youth development involves the five Cs listed above, with a sixth C of contribution. The five Cs refer to the necessary desired characteristics to foster in youth for their success. The sixth refers to the idealized development where they in turn has the opportunity give back to her community using her talents. While the focus of PYD is not simply on reducing negative outcomes, it is believed
that encouraging these six components will decrease problem behavior (Lerner, 2005).

Owing to the ontological basis of the theory, it is important to remember that the five Cs are situated within a context and not all situations are conducive to positive youth development. Each youth is situated within a web of relationships guiding her development over time (Lerner, Bowers, Geldhof, Gestdóttir, & DeSouza, 2012). At her disposal are different levels and types of assets affecting her needs and susceptibilities. The assets found in the community work in concert with the individual’s personal assets to shape her likelihood for success. Individuals rich in internal assets have a higher likelihood of success even when placed within asset poor environments. This connection also shapes the influence that community programs can have on youth (Lerner, Bowers, Geldhof, Gestdóttir, & DeSouza, 2012).

Assets, such as SBYD programs, create the situations for positive development that insulate against the negative events and pressures the young person will ultimately face (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Program developers can maximize positive youth development by creating the proper supportive environment and determining the assets necessary to develop in youth for their greatest likelihood of success (Lerner, Bowers, Geldhof, Gestdóttir, & DeSouza, 2012). The social environment within SBYD programs should be marked by warmth, connectedness, communication, and both instrumental and emotional support from adult leaders (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). The environment should also foster opportunities to belong, leading the adolescents to develop a sense of belonging and connection (Perkins & Noam, 2007). Interactions should create positive social norms within the program (Perkins & Noam, 2007). The desired norms for the program depend on the cultural and community context and should be specific to the desired outcomes (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). For SBYD programs, a focus on the
mastery climate for sport skill development and norms of sportsmanship is key to the
development (Perkins & Noam, 2007).

The key elements of SBYD programs provide an overview of the ways in which the
programming may influence the types of interactions and relationships that occur and develop
within the programming space. However, these elements primarily reflect a top down view of
how adults in the space shape the adolescents’ peer level interactions. While the SBYD
framework establishes the types of relationship key to positive youth development, it does not
afford a way to study these relationships, particularly those that occur amongst adolescent peers.
For these purposes, I have looked to two frameworks drawn from child and adolescent studies,
peer experiences (Rubin et al, 2006) and the model of the peer influence process (Brown,
Bakken, Ameringer, & Mahon, 2008) to explore the peer environment among participants.

Peer Experiences

As adolescents age they begin to spend a greater percentage of their time with peers and
place more value on their peers’ opinions in comparison to those of significant adults, especially
in social matters (Brown & Larson, 2009; Brown et al., 2008). It is therefore important to
consider peer experiences among adolescent participants within the SBYD program. Peer
relationships grow increasingly complex as adolescents engage in the larger peer group system
where status within the peer hierarchy is based in, and influenced by, dyadic relationships
(Brown & Larson, 2009). The complexity and consequences of these relationships necessitate an
examination beyond the dyadic level.

Rubin and colleagues (2006) established a framework for studying peer experiences
grounded in escalating complexity: interactions, relationships, and groups. Interactions are the
least complex level, and encompass the exchanges that happen between two individuals.
Relationships are comprised of the history of interactions between two people, leading to the development of meaning and expectations for future behavior. At the most complex level are groups, which are the networks of relationships and interactions among connected individuals (Rubin, et al., 2006). Each level is important to note as the escalating complexity shapes the peer experiences of adolescents.

At the interaction level, individual actions are the stimuli for or are a reaction to the actions of another (Rubin, et al., 2006). However, the nature of these interactions is shaped by the relationship between the two individuals. The history that exists between individuals shapes their present and future interactions. The greater degree of their familiarity and connection strengthens the influence they may have over one another. In close relationships, interactions may be shaped by a desire to continue and/or improve the relationship. Additionally, cultural norms and adolescents’ perceptions of appropriate patterns of behavior shape not only how they perceive the relationship but also how they choose to act (Rubin, et al., 2006).

Groups, in turn are comprised of multiple relationships and are shaped by their patterns of interactions (Rubin, et al., 2006). The properties of the group extend beyond those of the individual relationships to include cohesiveness, hierarchy, inclusivity, and more. Further, specific norms and behaviors emerge that differentiate group members from outsiders. These group properties influence the nature of the experiences of the individuals of the group. Specifically, hierarchy and segregation shape who children interact with and how. The cohesiveness among members shapes the sense of belonging that individual members feel and thus the level of influence they have over one another. As a result of both the complexity and interplay amongst all of these levels, it is imperative that a study of peer experiences in any context takes into account all of these levels and the individual, rather than analyzing multiple
one-to-one interactions as if they occurred in a vacuum (Rubin, et al., 2006). These three levels of complexity provide an overview as to how to study the peer environment generally. However, the model proposed by Brown and colleagues (2008) narrows in on the specifics of a particular type of peer interaction, that of peer influence.

**Peer Influence Process**

Brown and colleagues (2008) developed a model (see figure 2.1) that includes a process of event-influence-response, as key events begin the process of influence and the target adolescent responds. The process ultimately leads to some outcome for the adolescent. To indicate the reciprocal nature of influence, feedback loops extend from the response to both the activation of influence and the event, demonstrating the influence that the target adolescent has in turn on the influencing adolescent (Brown et al., 2008).

![Figure 2.1. Conceptual model of the peer influence process (Brown et al, 2008, p.34)](image_url)
Influence is affected by four additional factors which provide context for the event and ensuing response: timing, mode, intensity, and consistency (Brown et al., 2008). Timing refers to the relevant influences triggered by the event. These influences may be actual current occurrences or based on adolescent’s expectations for peer behavior. The influence of peers can be exerted immediately, such as in a face to face encounter, but it may be felt outside of the presence of peers, such as in recalling memories or expectations of peer reactions. Modes of influence include reinforce, encourage, display, structure opportunities, obstruction, and antagonize (Brown & Larson, 2009). Intensity refers to the force of the mode, and consistency to the alignment of the adolescent’s experiences of influence towards a specific course of action (Brown et al., 2008). Possible responses to the influence within the model include acceptance, accession, ignoring, rejection, and counter. The adolescent’s response and outcome behavior are modified by his or her openness to influence, the salience of the influencer, the dynamics of their relationship, and the ultimate ability to enact the encouraged behavior (Brown et al., 2008).

When adolescents conform to peer influences, they do so for specific reasons. Brechwald and Prinstein (2013) write:

By conforming to peers’ behavior, adolescents engage in behaviors that are associated with high peer status; match the social norms of a valued or desired social group; lead to extrinsic behavioral reinforcement within a social context; and contribute to an intrinsically rewarding sense of a favorable self-identity (p. 169).

The nature of the adolescents’ relationships to their peers may impact their openness to influence. At the group level, centrality and positive friendship quality may encourage greater conformity to peers. In relationships, peers who are of higher status exert more influence than lower status peers (Brechwald & Prinstein, 2015). Additionally, the target adolescent’s
perception of the influencer’s level of knowledge in the area affects the strength of the influence (Brown & Larson, 2009). Further, at the individual level, self-esteem, the number and quality of friendships (Bukowski, Velasquez, & Brendgen, 2008), previous experience (Brown et al., 2008) and level of competence in the area (Brown & Larson, 2009) have been suggested as moderators for adolescents’ openness to peer influence.

The four frameworks demonstrate an escalating level of specificity to address the research problem. The SBYD framework sets the context for adolescent experiences, the framework of peer experiences provides a lens through which to view them, and the model of the peer influence process then is the magnifying lens to analyze the interactions that occur. Intersectionality encouraged me to address physical inactivity of Black and Hispanic girls by focusing on and highlighting their experiences rather than making assumptions based on literature that does not account for them or include their voices. The framework also highlights the need to consider the ways in which their race and gender shape their experiences of the world and thus of the peer environment. The participants’ raced and gendered experiences permeate each level of their peer experiences and provide a greater context for all potential experiences. These four frameworks work together to address all levels necessary and provides sufficient context for this study.

**Research Questions**

My review of the existing physical activity and sport literature has revealed a gap in research on peer experiences of Black and Hispanic adolescent girls. As a result of this review and guided by the conceptual frameworks described above, I sought to address the following research questions:
• What is the observed peer environment of Black and Hispanic adolescent girls within a Sport Based Youth Development (SBYD) setting?

• How do Black and Hispanic adolescent girls perceive their peer experiences in a SBYD setting?
  o How do they perceive individual interactions with peers in the group?
  o How do they perceive the relationships between and among group members?
  o How do they perceive the group in the context of the greater peer environment of their school and other social spaces?

• In what ways do these perceptions influence Black and Hispanic adolescent girls’ participation in the SBYD setting?
CHAPTER 3

Methods

Case Study

Case study research is set apart by its focus on the specific unit of analysis, the case, which is limited in scope, bounded by time or some other criterion and can be a particular person, program, event, or group (Merriam, 2009). This form of research is particularly suited for research foci where the researcher has little control over the actors (Yin, 2018). In particular, it is suited for studying the interactions among participants and for phenomena that are heavily context specific (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Case studies are particularistic because they are bounded to a specific case, descriptive as they should provide a rich description of that case, and heuristic as they use multiple variables to develop a rich description and deeper understanding of the context (Merriam, 2009).

In the adolescent literature, case studies were found focused on both single individuals (see Howard, Cohn, & Orsmond, 2006) and entire groups (see Larson & Walker, 2006). While adolescent studies did not focus specifically on peer interactions, case study designs have been used to study interactions within peer groups such as among preschool children as by Kim (2016). Previously, case study methodology has been used to study preadolescent girls in an SBYD setting as a means to provide greater context for development outcomes (Bruening, Dover, & Clark, 2009). As such, this form of research was well suited for the study of peer interactions with the SBYD setting.

My questions were targeted towards a particular program, a SBYD program for middle school girls, and the participants’ perceptions and interactions as they occur within this program. The use of this design allows for rich descriptive understanding of the program and its
participants within their specific context, as bounded by the programming year and the specific programmatic focus. In particular, a case study utilizing observations and interviews was the best method to answer my research questions.

**Participants and Recruitment**

The case was a particular SBYD program serving Black and Hispanic eighth grade girls, The Strong Ties Girls Program (also referred to as Strong Ties or Strong). This program was especially suited as a case particular to this research problem because it reached participants at the juncture of the most vulnerable age (thirteen and fourteen), gender (female), and racial classification (Black and Hispanic) in terms of physical inactivity. The program itself provided an opportunity to observe the interactions between participants, the environment created by these adolescent participants, and their physical activity behavior.

Strong Ties met twice weekly throughout the school year. Sessions took place in school during a block in which no core classes were taught, allowing approximately fifty minutes of programming time. At the beginning of this study, it served ten adolescent participants, which later dropped to nine. The program was supported by seven adult female staff members, with two to four adults at each session. All youth participants and adult leaders were invited to participate in this research study.

I served as one of the female leaders in this program and thus had a pre-existing relationship with both the adolescent participants and the adult leaders prior to the start of this case study. As a key adult in the program, there was the potential that my role would exert an undue influence over the girls, leading them to feel as if they may not truly opt out of the research participation. The risk of that power differential necessitated the use of a third-party adult not connected to the program to introduce the study to youth participants to reduce any
pressure on participants to assent where they would rather decline (The University of Waterloo Office of Research, n.d.). Following that, they were reminded to bring their forms by third party staff members, and I supplied additional parental permission forms if needed. Because I did not have a similar power position over adult participants, I introduced the study to them. Six youth assented and all (7) adult leaders consented to participate in varying capacities.

**Subjectivity Statement**

My role in the program deserves further explanation beyond the potential pressure upon research participants. As a qualitative researcher I was involved intimately in the process, serving as the investigator and the instrument for the research. I chose the research questions and case, collected and analyzed the data, and reported the findings. My subjectivities in this process cannot be ignored. Subjectivity calls for the recognition of the researcher’s identity as a major influencer in the research process (Jacob, 2006). Rather than striving for objectivity, I recognized that I cannot fully remove myself from the work and view the object of focus in a totally objective manner (Berger, 2015).

I identify as a Black female and served as one of the adult leaders in a program serving participants who identify as Black and/or Hispanic. I was a member of the group and researched as an indigenous insider in that regard. However, my adulthood, ethnic background and level of power positioned me as an outsider to the adolescent peer groups. As such, youth participants, in particular, may dispute my perceptions of my position compared to their own. For example, though I am from outside of the surrounding community, participants may have focused on my status as a Black woman and involvement in the program in assessing my position. The ratio of participants (9-10) to the leaders (2-4) may have shifted the power to their hands, disrupting my
notions of my position of power. However ultimately, I do recognize my seat of power over the research product.

I was one of the instruments through which the program was created and ultimately controlled how findings have been presented. These two pieces were shaped by my perceptions of the greater social context and my personal mission to work with girls. My thoughts on the research setting were shaped by my knowledge of the literature on adolescents and SBYD. My previous coaching experience, interactions with other girls, and previous years working within the program shaped how I interacted with participants and thus how they interacted with me. I held all of this in mind as I entered into the collection and analysis of data.

**Data Collection Procedures**

Because case studies should be highly descriptive, a hallmark feature of this methodology is the use of multiple forms of data collection within the one study (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Options for data collection include interviews, observations, documents, physical artifacts, historical records, and survey data (Baxter & Jack, 2008). For this study the three forms of data collection were observations, interviews, and sociograms.

Observations of programming time occurred during each twice weekly programming sessions, equating to approximately one (1) hour twice per week over the course of eight weeks. This resulted in a total of for an estimated total of 13 observations due to school closures and cancellations. In addition to observations during programming time, I observed participants and the greater school environment in in other contexts, including classrooms, hallways, and free periods. These additional observations provided a contrasting context for the youth participants’ peer experiences to improve my understanding of the factors influencing their behavior during
program sessions. These observations also provided a general context for better understanding the school environment as a whole and the influence it may have had on their behaviors.

Observations of the setting, behaviors, and interactions were recorded through the use of field notes. Written notes (jottings) were taken following school observations and during the programming session at times to form memory cues. Because I noticed that jotting notes during sessions made me less present and limited my ability to observe events, I shifted to only recording my notes after the observation period. Voice notes were taken following program sessions to highlight key events prior to fully transcribing notes on a computer. Voice memos were also used to record when I had been thinking though the data in terms of my own experiences with sport and physical activity as a girl and as a woman.

Following each program session, adult leaders were invited to participate in “de-briefings” where they were asked to provide their observations of the previous session. These were informal sessions and conversational in nature. In other words, I did not take the lead in guiding the discussion beyond calling for a start. In that regard conversation topics included what we as program leaders could do to shift the experiences of girls in the program by altering aspects of the environment or approach. Topics also included adults’ perception of the program, participants, and the school environment.

Interviews with assenting youth participants took place within the school building. While most occurred during the school day, one interview took place after school. Prior to the first interview youth participants were asked to complete a sociogram, or visual representation, of their peer relationships prior. Sociograms provide the ability to assess group membership and relationship status (Cillessen & Marks, 2017). For this reason, researchers have found it essential to better understand the peer context of adolescents to better understand their behaviors. In this
study, participants were asked to provide a list of peers who they considered as very close, somewhat close, and not close. They were prompted to provide three names per category but given the freedom to list as few or as many as desired. These names were then used to fill in a set of concentric circles with the inner most representing very close, the second as somewhat close, and the outermost as not close. This document was used as a prompt and primer for interviews and as a form of data collection in its own right. Participants were then asked their perceptions of the peer environment in the program and school and the influences on their own physical activity. Other topics included the participant’s physical activity choices and perception of Strong Ties. The questions were informed by the peer influence model (Brown et al, 2008), framework of peer experiences (Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 2006), and sport-based youth development (Perkins & Noam, 2008) in order to better understand the role of peer experiences in their physical activity choices.

DeRoche and Lahman (2008) propose that the adolescent’s comfort level with the form of interviewing is important in determining the strength of that interview style. As a result, they suggest that adolescents be given the option to participate in focus groups or in-depth individual interviews as they may not be comfortable disclosing on particular topics in the presence of peers (DeRoche & Lahman, 2008). For this reason, participants were given the option to be interviewed individually or in groups, to expand upon those insights and allow space for those who may be more vocal in a one on one environment. Individual interviews allowed for individual perspectives and to give voice to those less active in focus group and create a “safer” environment to discuss the influence of peers within and without program on behavior in program and engagement. These individual interviews covered the same topics as the corresponding group interviews.
The group interviews provided an additional layer of information regarding peer interaction (Slater & Tiggeman, 2010) and was an additional space to observe how the girls interacted with one another. They also increased members’ ability to share and jog their memories (Brown, 2015). In particular the girls often fed off of one another, which led to additional topics that I would not have thought to ask about not knowing their peer contexts as well as they do. In the opening round of interviews, participants were granted the option of either solo interviews or as a group.

No girls opted for a completely solo venture. In those interviews where there was a single main interviewee, girls asked to have a friend attend with them. The additional participant provided input at times and also asked for clarification from her peer. In particular, in Blueberry’s interview, Sh’nana asked to serve as co-interviewer, asking Blueberry the interview questions. My role was to chime in to ask clarifying questions and then taking over if Sh’nana didn’t understand the meaning of the question. During the course of the interview, Sh’nana transitioned into being a co-interviewee, speaking to the nature of the peer/school context. Questions in the second and third rounds were based on the themes found in the individual interviews and observations. For example, girls were asked about particular interactions or events that were captured in field notes and asked to provide their perspective.

The second and third rounds of interviews were designed as group interviews. One attempt was made to conduct a large focus group in the second round. In particular having the large group altogether led to multiple side conversations, low attention, and too much feedback for the recording. Quieter participants were silenced due to the personalities of the more outspoken participants who monopolized speaking in the setting. This focus group was then followed up with questioning in smaller groups in order to allow participants sufficient
opportunity to speak and provide greater depth (Finch, Lewis, & Turley, 2014). Group size was determined by availability and preference of participants. All interviews, focus groups, and debriefings were audio recorded.

**Analysis**

Audio recordings were transcribed by a combination of personal effort and a third-party transcription service. Transcriptions were then combined to create a database for the case study using qualitative analysis software, Atlas.ti (Yin, 2018). The data was analyzed both inductively and deductively using thematic analysis. Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006) outline thematic analysis as a process to discover themes within the data. Codes are used to “capture” the data and organize the information as the researcher notices the patterns within it, leading to the development of themes. This form of analysis afforded the ability to incorporate both deductive and inductive coding in order to allow findings to emerge from the data directly and work with categories determined by the conceptual frameworks (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). In particular, inductive analysis allowed me to account for the experiences of participants which may not be covered in literature dominated by a focus on White adolescent girls, providing the potential to add new knowledge specific to Black and Hispanic adolescent girls (Collins, 2015). Codes were used to “capture” the data and organize the information as I noticed the patterns within it, leading to the development of themes (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). This process continued as I reanalyzed the data and refined the categories allowing themes to emerge from the data (Thomas, 2006).

The first phase of thematic analysis requires gaining familiarity with the data (Braun & Clarke, 2012). The process of reading and rereading the data allowed me to see the data as a part of the larger picture they collectively created (Saldaña, 2016). This process included several
close readings of the text (along with a listen to the recording where appropriate) to familiarize myself with it before moving into coding and categorizing (Thomas, 2006). Then, the first round of coding was holistic coding, a method that allows for coding “basic themes” in the data that arise generally (Saldaña, 2016). This phase of the process was wholly inductive, as I developed codes based on what I was noticing within the documents. This allowed me to continue to gain familiarity with the stories of the participants. In the next phase, I added into this process the use of deductive codes developed from the literature. I continued to search for patterns in the codes and sought to combine or cluster those that shared a unifying thread (Braun & Clarke, 2012). I developed themes which account for each set of related codes. Then, I defined the categories and their unifying qualities between codes. After this, I reviewed those created themes, discarding, collapsing and redefining them based on review in context of the coded data they contained and then in context of the entire data set. This allow me to determine if the themes developed captured the meanings in the data and sufficiently answered the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

As alluded to above, deductive analysis was based on the frameworks of peer experiences (Rubin et al., 2006) peer influence (Brown et al, 2008), and sport-based youth development (Perkins & Noam, 2007). Based on this literature I developed categories to guide data analysis (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). This included modes of influence, the level of peer relationship, and social environment created in the SBYD setting. Additional codes for game interactions were developed based on the Athlete Behavioural Coding System (Viermaa & Côté, 2015) These codes were identified, defined, and given a description as to how they may show up in the data analysis (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Reliability of codes were tested by using
the codes to analyze a sample of data. I asked a peer reviewer to do the same to check for coding consistency (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2016).

Peer reviewers were presented with sets of the data, codes and definitions. They were then asked to review the data in order to determine the relevance of the codes to the particular section. We then discussed the data to come to shared meanings of the meanings found within the data. This was an iterative process going back and forth in conversation, discussing the data and theme development.

**Reflexivity**

Being an insider helped me gain access into the program, background knowledge in the subject area and about the population, and provided a basis for understanding “nuanced reactions from the participants” (Berger, 2015, p. 233). However, being an insider to the program also predisposed me to bias throughout the research process. This increased the need for diligent reflection and recognition of my assumptions and perceptions of the participants (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009).

Throughout the course of the research, I kept track of the reflexivity process by keeping a log of the potential benefits and possible barriers of my subjectivities. My unchecked assumptions colored how I perceived the words and actions of the participants (Hsuing, 2008). To address these assumptions, I enacted critical reflection throughout, during observations, interviews, and analysis (Berger, 2015).

Throughout data collection and analysis, I maintained a log of my personal perceptions in addition to observations of the setting. In order to do, I completed a “conceptual baggage” inventory chart regularly to recognize my subjectivity and locations and the ways in which they may have aided or hindered the research (Hsiung, 2008). I continued this process of locating
myself in the research throughout data collection and analysis. In the writing of observation notes, my critical reflection included my understanding of my role in the research setting, emotions felt during the encounter and transcription process, and my perceived influence on others in the setting (Maharaj, 2016).

This critical reflection extended to the interview process. Generally, researchers’ unconscious leanings may create leading questions, unchecked assumptions, misinterpretation of words, or acceptance of yes/no answers without probing (Hsiung, 2008). Further, following the interview guide too closely may lead researchers to not probe or seek to better understand participants’ perceptions and the meaning they attempt to convey in their answers. In particular as an insider research, this was an especially salient risk. As suggested by Dwyer and Buckle (2009), I attempted to bracket what my assumptions and perceptions were as I took note of the participants. For this reason, I asked probing questions to encourage the participants to provide more detail rather than relying on my own assumptions in analyzing their quotes. Additionally, I yielded control over the interviews in some regards to the participants, allowing them to introduce and expand upon topics that became relevant in the course of the interview. This included allowing participants to ask questions of each other, in the case of one youth participant, who functioned as a co-interviewer, and particularly in the “debriefings” with adult participants. This yielded additional data that would not have been unearthed had I held strictly to the interview guide.

I performed member checking by asking participants to elaborate. In the interviews, I represented participants’ statements back to them at later stages in the interview process (Bruening et al., 2009). Conversations with participants, were also a space where they were asked to clarify their answers to ensure that I captured them precisely (Fuller, Percy, Bruening, & Cotrufo,
The last element to check my personal assumptions was the use of outsiders to assist with the analysis of data. Outsider status may provide the benefits of distance from the experiences of the participants, a critical lens developed based on different viewpoints, perspective, and the ability to take note without the entanglement of personal identity (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). Such a person would have fewer assumptions because of lack of experience with the group and will have the ability to address the data in a new way (Berger, 2015). I met with a peer debriefer, who was not as intimately involved in the program to discuss coding schemes and my perceptions of the setting.

**Case Description**

**City: Brachton**

Brachton is a major northeastern US city. After suffering steep economic declines following the second world war and departure of multiple corporations in the twentieth century, the city has not fully recovered. These economic hardships were exacerbated by highway developments which physically split the area, cutting off many residents’ access to jobs on the other side of the divide (Office of the Mayor, n.d). The persistence of high rates of poverty, preventable diseases, and limited access to vital health resources, spurred local and federal government to provided funding for renewal efforts throughout the city. Multiple community organizations combined forces with the government in a joint effort to provide vital resources particularly surrounding education and economic development, fair and affordable housing, and health outcomes (Office of the Mayor, n.d). Plans for development were also aimed at improving aspects of the built environment of the neighborhood, such as repurposing abandoned buildings for the good of the community. ([Brachton], 2000 Inc, 2019) The plan adopted by the local government was to

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2 References have been edited to remove the location of the city and district in order to maintain confidentiality. See Langager and Spencer-Cavaliere (2015) for precedent.
have taken into account the issues voiced by residents and the input from various stakeholders within the community ([Brachton] 2000, Inc). Some of these revitalization efforts have been blocked by corporate entities who opposed them based on how the building developments would affect their property interests ([Author], 2019). See table 3.1 for information regarding economic measures of the area.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>High school completion rate</th>
<th>Unemployment</th>
<th>Median Income</th>
<th>Poverty rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>23,200</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>30,200</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>37,800</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.1 Economic statistics by Race/Ethnicity ([Author], 2014)

Information about the area largely focuses on the city’s struggles, feeding into the stigma surrounding the area ([Author], 2017). Outsiders cast the area as dangerous and crime ridden before getting to know the people and community ([Author], 2017). Residents are able to see past the characterization to recognize Brachton’s beauty. While outsiders may perceive the city as without hope and with little to offer, residents see more ([Author], 2015). Despite the economic downturns and upheavals which have in fact left their mark, the movement of many “minority” residents into the area for work has led the area to blossom with culture. (See Table 3.2 for race and ethnicity data for Brachton.) In particular the beauty of that ethnic diversity is Hispanic displayed through bright colors, food, and flags of the various homelands represented throughout the city. The vibrancy of the cultures and communities blend with the legacy of colonialism still present in the buildings where they live, work, and play (Delano, 2015).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Largest Ethnic group represented</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>Puerto Rican</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>Caribbean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>European</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.2 Brachton Race/Ethnicity 2014 statistics ([Author], 2014)

**Institutional Racism**

An important element of the context for this study of a school-based SBYD program is institutional racism. Institutional racism is derived from the policies and practices that disproportionately affect particular racial groups (The Aspen Institute, n.d). In schools this includes those practices that systematically advantage white students or leave other students (particularly Black and Hispanic) with diminished outcomes. These practices and policies are not necessarily formed through “racist” intent, nor are they confined to the hands of White leaders (Taylor & Clark, 2009). As Taylor and Clark (2009) write, “When students of color are consistently disadvantaged, institutional racism is operative, regardless of policy wording, decision-makers’ intention, or decision-makers’ race (p. 116).” Such practices and policies may be race neutral on the surface but still have a detrimental effect on particular populations.

Within schools, discipline disparities have been pointed to as evidence of institutional racism at work within schools (Taylor & Clark, 2009). However, the disproportionate number of school closures in Black and Hispanic communities (Kohli, Pizarro, & Nevárez, 2017), chronically reduced achievement expectations, limited access to challenging and interesting curricula, and subjection to underqualified teachers and administrators are all further examples of this form of racism harming Black and Hispanic students (Taylor & Clark, 2009).
Though the racial differences in student achievement are due to effects of policy and practice at the institutional level, students and communities of color shoulder the blame for school failures (Kohli, Pizarro, & Nevárez, 2017). Rather than the institution taking responsibility and investing resources, efforts rest on getting students and parents to change their behavior in some way. Policymakers, from the classroom up to the district, shift responsibility away from the institution and onto the individual. In this way, individuals are asked to conform to systems not designed to best serve their needs (Kohli, Pizarro, & Nevárez, 2017).

**Brachton School District**

The Brachton school district overall is primarily Black (39.9%) and Hispanic (53.1%) in a state that is primarily White (12.8% Black, 24.8% Hispanic) ( [...] State Department of Education, 2019a). The district has been characterized by frequent turnover in leadership. The current superintendent is the third in the four-year span of the Strong Ties program. If they completes their contract, this will be the second longest tenure in the last 25 years of the district, though it has lasted less than 5 years ([Author], 2018b). Nationwide, tenure lengths for superintendents average six years (Superville, 2018). However short stints are common in districts with high minority populations and/or percentages of students experiencing poverty; five years or less than 5 years is common in these districts. Districts with fewer than 25% students of color tend to have superintendents with tenures which average twelve years. When student populations comprise of fewer than 25% low income students, superintendent tenure is 8.59 years (Superville, 2018).

In addition to the frequent turnover in leadership, the district has also experienced significant change due to the closure and consolidation of its public schools. The school consolidations are a part of a multiyear plan, purported to better use resources in an era of lower
enrollments across the district ([Author], 2018a). The plan is supposed to ensure that resources can be better targeted and shared to meet students’ needs in all of its schools. Feeling undervalued and as if their opinions have been ignored parents and community members have expressed their disappointment in the district. They believed their communities to be adversely affected by this decision ([Author], 2018a).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>District</th>
<th>State</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of Black/African American students</td>
<td>39.9</td>
<td>12.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of Hispanic/Hispanic students</td>
<td>53.1</td>
<td>24.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of White educators</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chronic absenteeism rate</td>
<td>25.3</td>
<td>10.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suspension/expulsion rate</td>
<td>12.4</td>
<td>6.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduation rate</td>
<td>68.8</td>
<td>87.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free or reduced-price meals eligible</td>
<td>73.5</td>
<td>36.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.3: District and State School data ([…] State Department of Education, 2018a)

Representative of the discontent with the district, a recent school board meeting was the site for the airing of many of these frustrations. Teachers began by expressing their sense that district leaders do not adequately addressed their needs. ([Author], 2019). Teachers spoke of feeling unsafe due violent students and unsupported by administrators who turn a blind eye to the behaviors (BBOE, 2019). In particular one teacher believed that the students are less inclined to work, listen, or show respect. They further spoke of students who roved hallways with impunity and parents who did not respect their discipline decisions. Two teachers provided counter stories,
calling for fellow teachers to be held accountable for failing students, citing the lack of educational rigor and care as the reasons for student behaviors such as walking out of classrooms. Parents were appalled to have so much blame placed on their children by the largely white teaching staff represented. They felt many of the complaints from teacher were due to their lack of cultural understanding and, potentially, underlying racism (BBOE, 2019). They felt as if the overwhelmingly white teacher populations simply were ill equipped to interact with the largely Black and Hispanic student population. One parent specifically called for more teachers who reflect the student population ([Author], 2019; see table 3.3 for state and district school data).

Teachers looked the district’s recent focus on restorative practices as a reason why students are now allowed to misbehave without repercussion ([Author], 2019). Restorative practices are those that place a focus on repairing the damage problem behaviors cause to the school community and centers discipline on relationship building rather than punishment (McClure, 2016). The district’s adoption of the policy was a move taken in order to reduce out of school suspensions and expulsions ([Author], 2019). The push to shift towards restorative practices was aimed at avoiding criminalizing the children with penalties, such as suspensions and expulsions, that decrease student learning time and thus future outcomes. However, in making this change, teachers expressed concerns that administrators have not provided sufficient consequences to address problem behaviors. Rather than finding alternatives to suspensions, administrators have simply ignored problem behavior and not held students accountable. In turn administrators have been asked to find the underlying issues leading to problem behavior and address the socio-emotional causes and take trauma sensitive approaches. District wide, there
has been a push to change the language of policies to improve students understanding of what they mean for their behavior ([Author], 2019).

**Evers Elementary**

The district’s plan for school closure and consolidation has meant an influx of students into the remaining schools, including the site for this case. Evers Elementary School (further referred to as Evers) is the site where the Strong Ties program took place. In both the 2016-2017 and 2017-2018 school years, Evers became the home for students from the closed King and Abernathy Elementary schools respectively. Data for each of these schools is included below in Table 3.4.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Enrollment</td>
<td>295</td>
<td>251</td>
<td>246</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black/African American</td>
<td>38.5</td>
<td>51.4</td>
<td>32.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic/Hispanic</td>
<td>59.2</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of White educators</td>
<td>71.1</td>
<td>47.1</td>
<td>54.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chronic absenteeism rate</td>
<td>33.5</td>
<td>31.1</td>
<td>29.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suspension/expulsion rate</td>
<td>11.2</td>
<td>20.3</td>
<td>21.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free or reduced-price meals eligible</td>
<td>86.8</td>
<td>91.6</td>
<td>96.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.4 School demographics comparisons ([…] State Department of Education, 2018b)

**Strong Community Programs**
Strong Community Programs is but one of the multiple community partners which provide services to the school. As partner of Evers, it provides sport based youth development programming during the school day. Built on the pillars of academic achievement, physical activity, nutrition, and life skills, Strong Community Programs has been engaged at Evers for almost 10 years with literacy and physical activity/nutrition programming. For the last three years, Strong Community Programs has been in residence at Evers, collaboratively planning and implementing programming with every grade, 5 days a week. Each grade level is offered different programming. While lower grades engage in whole class programs, middle school students are invited to opt in, or self-select, to participate to the gender specific programs for boys and girls. The girl’s program, Strong Ties, is the program at the center of this case.

**Strong Ties**

The Strong Ties program served 8th grade girls at Evers Elementary. It began with observations of student behavior in King Elementary. In that first year, I, along with another staff member, piloted the program with fifth grade girls. The goal of that year was to determine the student and school needs in order to develop a program that was most appropriate for the context. I observed the main issue to address was the quality of relationships between the girls. This was confirmed in meetings with teachers and administrators. The main focus of the resulting program would be to address relational issues, with the hopes this would lead to improvements in the girls’ social skills and, conflict resolution and thus a reduction in fighting.

The following school year, King was consolidated with Evers, and I began observations there. Similar relational issues were noted among the middle school girls and confirmed in meetings with teachers. The middle school program began in 2016 as an optional program. All 7th and 8th grade girls were invited to attend during their free period twice a week for hour long
sessions. In that first year we focused on providing representation of Black and/or Hispanic athletes and fitness professionals so that the girls could envision themselves as active. Despite our best efforts as leaders, the year was marked by infrequent attendance and inconsistent engagement. In the second year the program, attendance improved among 7th graders but many 8th grade members dropped out. Attendance was again inconsistent, but a core group of girls attended regularly.

In this past year, the program was delivered exclusively to 8th graders. This included those who had attended as 7th graders and the addition of more girls, particularly those new to the school. The program schedule of sessions remained twice weekly during the school day. Adult leaders provided physical activity programming such as active games and sport based activities with an additional focus on developing the girls socio-emotional skills.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Working agreement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- No aggressive physical contact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Use positive language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Phone basket</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Leave the drama at the door</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Participate in planned activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Have fun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Accountability options</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- 3 strikes rule</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- 3 infractions and you’re out</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Option ultimately chosen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Circle conversation with the whole group to address the issue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Write out what happened</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3.1 Strong Ties Working agreement

In the beginning of the program year, we met with the girls to the program norms. After these were agreed upon, they were written onto butcher paper, all members and leaders signed their names and this became our working agreement (see Figure 3.1). It would be referred to throughout to remind the girls of our expectations for them, which they themselves chose.
The program continued to evolve throughout the year. Monthly cooking demonstrations and recipe tastings were included to honor participant feedback. The agreement to “leave the drama at the door” morphed into an opening circle, where each girl would anonymously write how she was feeling on a notecard, fold it and place it into a bucket. Afterwards, all in the circle, leaders included would pull a notecard and read it aloud. However, there were some abuses of the anonymity, particularly the writing of obscene phrases. Due to the girls’ preference, and as a result of some inappropriate uses of the practice, we moved to stating aloud our feelings in the circle to open the group. The circle became a space for conversation and connection with peers. Program leaders also used the circle as a space to respond to what was happening in the greater peer environment and allow time to talk things over or adapt to the climate of the school for the day, especially the high emotionality following student fights that occurred earlier in the day.

Sample Daily Schedule

- 2:25 - Pick up, teachers notified to release students
- 2:30 - Program official start time, beginning of talking circle
- 2:35 - Cut off arrival time to receive snack
- 2:40 - End of talking circle, Options of the day introduced and voted on
- 2:45 - Activity time
- 3:15 - Bussers arrive, enter room for dismissal
- 3:30 - Program end

Figure 3.2 Strong Ties Daily Schedule

The program was also affected by a decision to use the programming room as a dismissal site for bus riders. All students who rode busses were previously dismissed to the auditorium prior to boarding their busses. However, there were safety concerns due to the larger number of
students and little supervision. As a result, students were dispersed from their classrooms to wait in various rooms based on their bus number. The thought was smaller spaces would allow the assigned staff better supervision capabilities. The Strong Ties room was chosen by administration as one of these dismissal sites. Bus students were dismissed from their classrooms to wait in the Strong Ties classroom until they were called to board their bus. Though school staff had been assigned to attend to the bussers, they often remained outside of the room rather than supervising directly. The sheer number of students entering the space and behavioral often led to disruptions in programming.

Regardless, attendance and engagement were higher than it had been in years previous, though there were still major concerns regarding inconsistency. Attendance patterns similar to those in previous years began to emerge. At times activity options needed to be adjusted to account for fewer than expected players, such as when only 3 or fewer were in attendance. Other times girls would attend programming, but sit off to the side refusing to engage in the activity. This study is largely driven by my desire as a practitioner to better understand those underlying factors influencing the girls’ decision to attend and/or participate. Generally, the reasons why the girls chose to come to program were (with sample quotes):

- Getting out of class:
  - Coco: “Because I don't want to be in (Teacher W) [class].”

- Fun:
  - Sh’nana: Oh yeah, cuz it's, like it's fun.

The general reasons for not coming to program include:

- A desire to be with outside peers:
- Jasmine: Sometimes I just want to be with my friends that's why I'll be like I don't want to come. That's why.

- Alternative options provided within the school:

  - Jordan: Yeah, because some of our intervention teachers be like, oh we can stay in here because like, we don’t have nothing or we just be having free time.

The beginning of this data collection period coincided with a shift in the program. That first day we had low attendance with few girls showing up to program. Sade and I found the other girls and had a collective conversation with the entire group asking them to give reasons why they were not coming to program and what we could do to make it more enjoyable for them. Reminded that this was an optional program, they were to decide if they would remain in it and come consistently.

As a result of the feedback we received that day, we began to alter the activity offerings in order to better address desires and provide them with more ownership and agency in program design. The first step was to honor their suggestion to incorporate more board/card games. While this meant providing less active game options, it allowed us to keep their interest, boost attendance, and more importantly honor their voice. Doing so allowed us to continue to engage in our relationship building with them and provide talking spaces for them. It ensured the program was a space where they were comfortable. We also began providing two activity options in the beginning of the session for them to vote on to increase their sense of agency and control over the program. At times we accommodated their input by shifting to options they suggested that day. Adult leaders collectively decided to being providing a snack at the beginning of each session in response to “hungry” being the most common feeling word given in the circle and to encourage on time arrivals.

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Participants

While there were ten girls who participated in this program, six youth participants assented to participate in this research study. All of the adult leaders (7) consented to participate in some capacity. Each youth and adult participant was asked to provide her own pseudonym and personal descriptions. Those details can be found in Tables 3.5 and 3.6. of themselves are included below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Youth Participants</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Blueberry (Berry for short)</td>
<td>Needy, Lazy, unique. I’m Hispanic and Black. I’m average height. My favorite color is blue. I rather be inside than outside.</td>
<td>Hispanic/Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jasmine</td>
<td>I would describe myself by saying that I am smart, tall, a mixture of different things and goofy.</td>
<td>Black/Caribbean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jordan</td>
<td>I’m short. I’m a cool person and I’m chill but you gotta be respectful to me and I’ll give you the same in return</td>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heaven</td>
<td>Helpful, smart, intelligent, loving</td>
<td>Black/Caribbean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sh’nana</td>
<td>Funny. If you need a name, I will make a name up for you. Crazy, (“because I don’t know”) Smart, intelligent, useful (“I help people a lot”) Note: She was hesitant to fill the form out on her own. I asked her the questions aloud and filled them in for her. I asked her to elaborate why she would describe herself as crazy and useful.</td>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Coco | I am a polite person who as a *SLIGHT* attitude problem. I speak Spanish and I’m very *SHORT* for my age (emphasis participant’s own) | Hispanic

**Table 3.5 Youth participant descriptions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sade</td>
<td>Native [of the state]</td>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Worked in inner-city leadership 5 years</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Degrees in business admin and social work</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Passionate about positive school climate and culture</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interests: school leadership and youth development</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Presence in the program: Attended most sessions, co-leader in previous years of programming</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yani</td>
<td>22-year-old Mexican-American woman. Spent much of my childhood in Mexico and grew up in [a town neighboring Brachton]</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Presence in program: Consistently one day or more each week throughout the year with, strong presence in the school</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alexandra</td>
<td>Very adventurous, like to take risks</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interests in education, previous experience working with middle schoolers in other educational settings</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Race</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nicole White</td>
<td>White, female, educator. He held leadership within Strong Community, worked within multiple roles. Interested in student development.</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lynn</td>
<td>Fun, positive, organized, caring, focused. Presence in the program: One day per week. Leader in previous year, but decreased attendance due to other obligations. Maintained strong presence in the school in other capacities.</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucia</td>
<td>Educator. Presence in the program: One day per week but attendance decreased due to other obligations.</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nneka</td>
<td>(Author) Black woman. Makes really lame jokes and side comments. Competitive and enjoys playing the games. Presence in the program: Attended most sessions, co-leader in previous years of programming.</td>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.6 Adult participant descriptions

Because a major part of programming are the activities, an important part of this description is those activities they enjoyed the most. In table 3.7 I have provided the five games
and activities they cited most frequently as their favorite and representative quotes as to why they enjoyed the activity.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Favorite activities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Blanket drop</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Capture the flag</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Kemps</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Kickball</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tastings /Cooking</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.7 Youth participants’ favorite activities
CHAPTER 4

Findings

The findings of this study were compiled into eight themes. The first two themes address the overall school climate. These themes reveal that the climate of the school is characterized by low expectations and the normalization of aggression. The next two indicate that surveillance behaviors and obstruction are two types of interactions that influence the girls’ participation choices and experiences. The fifth theme covers the nature of the relationships between the girls in the programming environment. The sixth theme, ego-orientation, refers to competitive climate which shaped the nature of the group. The seventh theme references the adult leaders of the program and they ways in which they shaped the program environment. Finally, I close with the perceptions of the program space overall, specifically how it was situated as a place apart from the rest of the school.

Theme 1: Expectations

The overarching climate of the school is characterized by the low expectations students perceive for their behavior resulting from a lack of consistent discipline practices. Those perceptions were expressed by their choices to leave their classrooms throughout the day and in the ways the girls described discipline in the school.

The hallway

When students chose to leave their classrooms, the hallway became an important space. During class transitions, as students socialized with peers. I noted the use of security guards to keep students in line and urge them on to their next class. However, the hallway remained an important interaction space during scheduled class times as well. Middle schoolers seemed to use the hallway as a private interaction space. Having left their classrooms, they would proceed
to have conversations with their peers either walking around the school or sitting on the floor or in the stairwell in pairs or groups.

The second function was that of a place of emotional self-regulation. Students, especially those in lower grades, would walk out of their classrooms if something happened to have upset them, such as teasing from other students or disciplinary interactions with a teacher. While most hallway usage was calm, students, particularly those who were younger, were sometimes disruptive such as by slamming classroom doors or running and screaming.

The final use of the space was teacher directed and deals more broadly with out of class time. On at least two occasions I observed teachers instruct their students to remain in the hallway rather than in class. In the first case I walked with a student who was roaming in the halls to have him return to class. I was told that he was not allowed back in, which led the student to persist in the hallway. In the second instance the teacher instructed a young student to leave the line and remain in the stairwell for not meeting the standards of behavior. As a result, the student did not continue on to the classroom and thus walked throughout the halls. In other cases, teachers and staff allowed students to help with errands and other tasks during class time, including volunteering in other classrooms. In this way, some of the hallway behaviors were encouraged by school staff.

My observations of the hallway align with Brachton teachers’ complaints to the district school board. As they presented in the meeting detailed in the case description, students were observed to have walked throughout the halls. However, teachers did not note the socio-emotional needs fulfilled by doing so, namely the needs for socialization and emotional regulation. In addition, the role of school employees in encouraging this culture should be considered.
While students did use the space to fulfill socio-emotional needs, their choice to leave their classrooms was largely driven by their understanding of teacher expectations. They themselves noted inconsistencies among teachers. These differences guided their behavior.

**Expectations**

In speaking of their teachers, Coco described the differences, saying “Some teachers are nice, some teachers are mean, some teachers are bipolar, some teachers are lazy.” The group expanded upon this description:

Jasmine: Yes, let me explain. (teacher y), we all be getting lit in there.

Coco: (teacher x), she lets us have our moments. (teacher w)

Jasmine: “Alright shut up.” We got to go in her class, be like this. Can't say nothing.

Coco: We cannot say nothing... (Teacher Z) he's annoying. We talk at his class but he's annoying about it.

Blueberry: He always- Every time he be like

Jasmine: Yes, we be like, "Hi, Coco" he be like "[mimicking the voice] Jasmine, warning. Jasmine, do a reflection. dadadadadada" He be cutting us off, like let me finish my sentence.

The girls considered how they were able to interact with their peers in each class. They recognized a range of expectations, from laxity (providing the ability to get “lit” or in other words have unstructured time to interact with peers in the room) and strict intolerance of talking. It was also evident that they perceived differing expectations from classroom to classroom, including the workloads and approaches of the teachers. They did not believe they were expected to be in class. This was evident in their actions, particularly the culture of hallway walking that had developed.
As the school year came to a close, our girls began to visit our classroom more frequently throughout the week, outside of programming times. I often had the pleasure of their visit to the programming room, either in groups or solo. While they were welcomed, I would often inquire, “Aren’t you supposed to be in class?” On such occasions they would respond they “don’t do anything in there:”

Observation May 17, 2019: Then at 10:58 Jasmine and Jordan walked in to the Strong Ties room. Jordan asked if I had any snacks. … They stuck around and were talking to me. I asked what [extracurricular] they were supposed to be in. They said [which one], but they “don’t do nothing in there.”

They expanded on this perception, that “they don’t do nothing” in class, on another visit when I asked them specifically to tell me about their classes. They listed each class to me. In one they just watch YouTube videos, the other they watch movies. There was only one class they mentioned doing related work in. In one class in particular, the girls recognized the reason they do nothing was because the teacher gave up. They said that the students first did nothing asked of them and now teacher does not bother to ask them to anymore. Their understanding was that if they were not expected to do work in the classroom, then it was not important to be in the classroom.

Sh’nana expressed a similar sentiment in her interview, that they don’t do anything. However, she voiced this from a place of disappointment. Throughout her interview she had used variations of the phrase “they don’t care anymore” to describe her teachers. On each such occasion, I stopped her and asked her to explain. On the first occasion she used it in reference to gym class:
Sh’nana: When I was younger, we had bean bags, ropes, all that. We had to do all the exercises, but now, I don't think they even care about exercise. That's why when I come here, my bones be hurting. Y’all making me do exercise, my bones be cracking I be like “Oh I'm getting old.”

Nneka: You said that, "I don't think they care anymore." Why do you think that? You said that a couple of times before.

Sh’nana: Because like, man, in gym class, aren't you supposed to do gym class?

In her opinion, she recognized not only decreased expectations for what she should do as a student but also a difference in what opportunities were afforded to her in terms of the equipment and activities provided. What she conceptualized as a gym class was not what she was offered. Similarly, she noted decreased expectations in terms of student conduct:

Nneka: You say that they don't care anymore? Did they used to?

Sh’nana: Yes. I guess. I don't know. Man, this school- there's a lot wrong with this school.

Nneka: Would you care to go into depth? …

Sh’nana: So, like, when I was in second, third and stuff, if we cuss, we got consequences. Now, hey, kids can be going around hollering and cussing a million storms. And you would look at them and they still here. Fighting: supposed to get expelled and yet they still here. Back in my days, when I did that, I got in trouble.

Similar to her explanation of gym class, she distinguished between the expectations when she was younger versus what she experiences now. While not consciously drawing the comparison, Jasmine and Jordan reflected on the stricter uniform policies they were to uphold when they were younger. This contrasted with their current relationship with uniform policies, where uniform
code was followed much more loosely by the students. Likewise, I observed during a schoolwide day of kickball, students were not encouraged to participate but were allowed to wander off away from designated playing area. Sade spoke to this from a place of frustration:

I don't like that the kids are allowed to do what they want. The activity outside was kickball. … Most of them at that age, they don't want to play, because they don't know how to play. So, then it becomes … an issue. … We didn't have many seventh graders playing either. … A couple of the kids asked, "Oh Miss, do I have to play this game?" … Their teacher said, "No, if you don't want to play, you don't have to play." I was like, "Yes, you do." I said it after the teacher said it, and I'm like, "You know what? Just go with what your teacher said," but that shouldn't have to be the case, because it should be if you are out here, you are playing this game, there are no other options. (Sade)

Students are not held accountable to participate in the group activity. Sade sees this as especially problematic because of the potential that the students are avoiding the activity simply because they have no prior experience with it and are thus not challenged to try.

Damon (2004) writes, “Among the external assets commonly missed is the less tangible but equally critical area of community expectations for youth behavior (p. 20).” He goes on to stress the importance of telling young people what their gifts are and how they can and should share them with the community. High expectations from adults are what propel young people towards success. An environment where expectations are lowered or nonexistent stunt adolescents’ positive development. This cannot be viewed as separate from the institutional racism (Taylor & Clark, 2009). Not encouraging participation in activities or even in the classroom indicated a lack of challenge and reduced expectations. This practice is a systemic problem that violates the needs of the Black and Hispanic students in this study and those
nationwide. By not offering or expecting more, the school causes student to miss out on multiple opportunities for academic and personal development. This is particularly noteworthy as the practice of low expectations directly contrasts with the necessary environmental assets for positive youth development (Damon, 2004).

The greater schoolwide culture in which students felt comfortable leaving classrooms and avoiding activities bled into, and affected, our program sessions as well sessions. We were at times unable to locate girls on pickup because they were not in their appointed classrooms. Teachers interrupted sessions looking for missing students. Other times girls missed programming because they were engaged in conversation with friends elsewhere in the school. Frequently girls left the room during our session with permission and never returned. This prompted us to send a leader to look for them, discovering they were either in the hallway or in the classroom of another teacher or school partner. The culture of reduced expectations affected our start times, attendance rate, and ultimately our ability to establish consistency in our programming.

In my interview with Sh’nana, I had asked her to compare and contrast her opinions of the girls’ and her own behavior in program with how they behave during the rest of the school day.

We each will come down. We know our expectations, no cussing and all that. Upstairs, man those teachers don't be caring no more. They could be saying a million thousand cuss words, and yeah. In here we already know no cursing, leave all drama out the door.

All that. (Sh’nana)

When I asked specifically about how she and her peers treat each other throughout the day, she added.
Sh’nana: You remember our hit tag?

Nneka: Yes.

Sh’nana: We only play that upstairs. Down here, we don't play that. Y’all might think that we're really trying to fight each other. "It's just a game. Calm down." … Our hit tag is different because we don't play it down here. But upstairs, we're hitting each other. Expanding upon her explanation, she referenced the working agreement. In particular the expectations of “Use positive language,” “Leave the drama at the door,” “and “No aggressive physical contact.” Because of those explicit expectations and the leaders’ enforcement of them, she knew which behaviors would be unacceptable in the space. When expectations were clear, students were able to meet them appropriately. In her explanation of the differences between program and “upstairs,” Sh’nana referenced the game of Hit Tag. This game provided a lens into the normalization of physical aggression within the school.

Theme 2: Physical Aggression

The theme of physical aggression includes acts of physical harm between peers in the greater school environment. Physical aggression had been normalized as a part of school culture to the point of it becoming a game, an expected male behavior, and its use as a form of conflict resolution.

Hit tag

Acts of physical aggression among middle schoolers had evolved into a game called Hit Tag. Sh’nana and Blueberry began a discussion of this game when Blueberry explained why she enjoyed the exercise circuits and Circle Ball in program. They were good because she was often sore as she “get[s] hit in [her] arms and [her] back a lot” and “because I need to move my hands
around when I get hit.” Playing games in program helped her to reduce her resulting soreness.

Sh’nana stepped in to explain:

She would get hit the whole day because that's what everybody do. And then when she come down here- That goes for all the girls. That’s why when we come down here, we be talking about how our bodies are sore, and we’re hungry. It's because the boys tired us out and made us hungry. And they hit us. … They hit like they trying to break your bones or something. (Sh’nana)

I asked more about who was hitting her and why. They explained that it was a game, called Hit Tag, played by all of the middle schoolers. Any location was fair game. Once you were hit you had to “actually chase to hit them back.” They explained the possible modes of play:

Blueberry: You could just be sitting--

Sh’nana: “Miss, could I get a pencil” and then walk by a person, and they could hit you.

Blueberry: Right.

Sh’nana: You gotta walk by somebody else so you could hit them.

Blueberry: And then when you hit them back, they'd be holding your hands down. So, you've got to break out of them and then hit them.

Nneka: So, if somebody hits you, they got a pencil but you can't get up, you just hold onto it for the rest of the day and like, "I'm going to get you back?"

Sh’nana and Blueberry: Yes.

Nneka: Really?

Blueberry: Yes.

Sh’nana: And as soon as when it’s time to switch classes you just go and hit them back but you just gotta run fast enough so they don’t catch you.
The game reflected middle school norms surrounding aggression which then influenced individual behavior. Those norms included the acceptability of hitting others unprovoked and the necessity of retaliation. If someone hits you, you have to hit them back or find someone else to hit; those are the rules of the game.

Adolescents are able to hold complex views surrounding norms on physical aggression and view the acts as acceptable in specific contexts, though repugnant in others (Mulvey & Killen, 2016). However, when the peer group accepts these behaviors, adolescents may find it difficult to object to them. Though Sh’nana and Blueberry listed negative effects of this game (i.e. soreness and tiredness), they continued to take part rather than object. Though they recognized the game as something “all middle school” plays, hitting was the expected behavior, especially when interacting with boys.

**Male aggression**

Describing how they play horse with the boys, hitting was an expected part of the game, in a different way. They described the boys as taking the game to the extreme in setting up difficult shot attempts. However, when the girls would win the game, the boys responded by hitting them:

Blueberry: The boys take it to extremes.

Sh’nana: And then they get mad when they don't win, and then we gotta hear their whining mouth and all that.

Blueberry And then they hit us.

Sh’nana: 'Cause we beat them and all that.

Nneka: What do you mean they hit you?

Blueberry They hit us. For example, um-
Sh’nana: That’s where we got the game from, to tag people. The boys started it and we had to finish it.

Nneka: So, hit tag began because they lost [in] basketball?

Blueberry: Yeah.

Blueberry and Sh’nana: Whenever they lose anything.

Sh’nana: And the girl they see, they’re just gonna hit them.

Nneka: Wait, anything? Even if she wasn't playing with them?

Sh’nana: Yes.

Blueberry Yes.

Nneka: Wait, why?

Sh’nana: ’Cause that's boys.

Nneka: That's not boys.

Sh’nana: Yes, it is.

Blueberry: In this school yes, huh. Yes, it is. In this school.

Their understanding was that hitting was just what boys do and a normal part of their behavior. It was a reasonable response from the boys due to their frustration. For their part, however, the girls did not sit passively, but they “finish[ed] it” and aggressed back, again, emphasizing the importance of retaliation in response. While hitting was just a game to Sh’nana and Blueberry, physical aggression in the form of fighting was common behavior that bled into and influenced the program environment.

With the nature of the shared space in the school building, the programming room was used for bus dismissal. This meant we often had younger students enter the room during program sessions. On multiple occasions, I along with other adult leaders would have to disengage from
program in order to address behaviors among the otherwise unsupervised students. I took note on such an instance:

Observation May 10, 2019: I think we may have started playing again. But I can’t remember because two of the bussers (maybe first or second grade) started hitting each other, clearly moving towards it being a fight. I sprang up to them where they were on the carpet. …I turned attention away from the group and left the room to escort the kids to the bus. So, I have no idea what else was happening with group.

While none of the girls in the program were involved, the incident interrupted our session and forced adult leaders out of the room to address the situation. Simply by its proximity to our group, the act of aggression and the climate it is a product of affected program context.

In order to prevent the two boys from continuing to physically engage when the students were dismissed, Alexandra and I escorted them to their bus, meaning we were further distracted from our program session. I noted the resulting interaction with a school staff member:

Observation May 10, 2019: So, I walked with the kids. Alexandra was with me to help keep the two of them separate on the way. I was more frustrated because after we left our group to do that, the [staff member who helped with bus check-in] said to us outside, that one day we were “going to be really good moms.”

Not only did the students themselves consider this as acceptable behavior to settle their dispute, but the response from the staff member indicated that it was expected behavior that I should be prepared to deal with regularly should I parent boys. The acceptance of physical aggression from boys may be shaped by underlying gender stereotypes (Mulvey & Killen, 2016). Beyond the acceptance among students of aggression, adults saw this as normative behavior, particularly
from boys. That acceptance mirrors Sh’nana and Blueberry’s assertion of “that’s boys,” an acceptance of aggression as an immutable quality of masculinity.

**Aggression as conflict resolution**

However, as indicated in the pervasiveness of Hit Tag, boys were not the only physical aggressors. On a separate occasion as I went to retrieve Heaven for her interview, a fight began between two seventh graders in the nearly empty classroom. Eventually students came in and broke it up. Others were interested in watching the spectacle. Heaven, for her part was in the hallway and bemoaned not being able to see it, thinking of how she used to watch fights all the time back home in the Caribbean. As I walked with her and Sh’nana in the hallway back to the programming room, that was the topic at the forefront of their minds.

**Observation May 23, 2019:** Before [the interview] started the two were going back and forth talking about the fight. They said that the girl had been asking for it. They had said something similar as were walking down the hall. They were saying that the girls were asking for it because they had come from Abernathy and decided to pick on [her]…. Sh’nana added that [she] had been holding it in and holding it in and that is just what happens. One day you just explode and that happens. She couldn’t hold it in anymore.

Fighting then was an acceptable form of conflict resolution. Further by attempting to watch the fight, fellow students reinforced the behavior as not only acceptable but enjoyable. Though the girls had engaged using relational aggression (picking on her), the initiator’s act of physical aggression served to bring it to an end. Sh’nana’s analysis also indicates that there are no other foreseeable solutions to deal with the anger that may arise due to peer conflict. Talbott, Celinska, Simpson, and Coe (2002) found acts of social aggression often preceded physical fights. In these cases, the urban Black and Hispanic girls in the study noted the use of suspensions as a form of
discipline to handle the situation. Students may be better served if school staff instead paid attention to dynamics among students and the interaction history between the parties involved. Simply suspending students does not provide them with the necessary skills to resolve the underlying issues.

Both Sh’nana and Blueberry saw the Strong Ties program as a space that did provide an alternative to deal with these emotions that could otherwise lead one to fight. Sh’nana explained the program as “a place like to get like all your anger and your energy out.” She provided more depth to her answer saying:

Sh’nana: So, like, say like if you like wanna fight somebody and they'll [adults] be like, “Okay, we're going outside.” You can let us like run outside and the next thing you know, you forget all about you wanting to fight somebody, or like if like something happened upstairs and you come out- come down here, like you'll forget that what happened. Seriously, you won't be mad no more.

For Sh’nana, the Strong Ties program provided a place where the urge to fight subsided and you could forget the problems from earlier in the day. She distinguishes between the upstairs, where her classes and other peers reside, and Strong Ties. The distinction between the two allows her to distance herself from the events of the rest of the day. Blueberry speaks to this as well. Having the separate program space gave her the ability to feel better once in the room:

Nneka: What is it that makes you want to play or get involved? And then think about some things that make you not wanna come or not get involved or not play the game.

Blueberry: Some things that don't make me wanna play is my day could be really bad and then I just go there [Strong Ties] and my whole mood just changes. But like during the day, I could have a really bad day, and then once I see everybody in there, they just make
me laugh and they just do random stuff. And I leave the school with a smile on my face when I go to the room, all mad and angry.

In speaking about why she sometimes would not want to be engaged on a given day, Blueberry references her mood. When she came to program, her mood lifted. Though she may not have engaged in the activity that day, coming to the room still provided her with those emotional benefits. Similar to the finding of Strobel et al (2008) the program space stood in as a more positive environment than the rest of the school. However rather than being a separate site distant from the school, the program offered reprieve within the school building.

For our part, we adult leaders intentionally used the space, particularly the opening circle as an opportunity to gauge the mood of the room and respond to the climate of the day. I recalled using the circle in such a way:

Nneka: After we had the group of four fighting and then, we had that circle and then
Jasmine like basically spouting her wisdom in the circle-
Sade: So wise beyond her years. So wise beyond her years.
Nneka: Ugh. So, I think like, we had quite a few times like that where it was like, the room is off, so let's figure out, instead of what we were going to do today [or] planned, which was gonna to be super high energy, let's adapt to that space instead.

Following events of conflict, such as fights, the opening circle was an opportunity to address issues we observed or were made aware of that occurred earlier in the day. It also would, at times, allow us to gauge the mood of the room and potentially provide calmer alternatives to address the current state of the girls present. We would “adapt to that space,” and be intentionally more flexible with the plan to accommodate the girls’ requests, or choose to offer yoga or an
extended talking circle rather than an active game. Adapting also at times meant giving the girls
the space to speak through their issues with our presence as mediators and advisors.

**Theme 3: Surveillance**

Surveillance refers to the girls’ fears of being watched by their peers, and how they
altered their own behaviors in response. In particular this refers to the girls’ fear and behavioral
choices in response to this fear, the criticism they experience, and the act of monitoring each
other for conformity purposes.

**Fear of surveillance**

While Heaven consistently attended program, she often separated herself from the group
during circle or would become preoccupied with her phone rather than participating in the
activity. I asked why. She explained:

Heaven: Because sometimes they have someone in the group I don't want to talk to or
they annoy me. I get a little . . . quiet, when they keep watching me.

Nneka: Who's watching you?

Heaven: Everybody.

Nneka: Everybody's watching you?

Heaven: That's not true. I lied. When some people watch me. I get nervous.

In her subsequent interview I asked how she might explain the program to an outsider. She said
that she would explain it by saying “At first it's awkward” because “everybody looking at you.”

However, once the game started and people became more focused on the play, then “it’s fun.”
Coco cited how she felt when others watched her as the rationale for encouraging a friend to
participate in activities with her:

Nneka: There was the day … couple of weeks ago when we had Just Dance, Coco.
Coco: Yeah.

Nneka: You remember that? … You pulled [her] over like, “Come on, let's dance.”


Nneka: So why did you pull her over?

Coco: Because I didn't wanna dance by myself.

Nneka: Okay. Why not?

Coco: ‘Cause I don't want everybody staring at me. No, I got to dance with another person.

Rather than dancing alone, Coco pulled her friend by the arm to join her on the dance floor. Even though enjoyed dancing, especially the Just Dance game, she felt more comfortable having a friend with her. As Yungblut et al (2012) suggested in their research, the presence of her friend helped her have the confidence to take part in the activity whereas she otherwise might not have.

**Criticism**

In my observations, the girls’ fears of having others look at them was connected to how surveillance often led to criticism. In particular, there were times during program in which their skill level or abilities were criticized by others, namely Jasmine. This was particularly evident during a game of Four Corners Fitness. The rules of the game were that a caller in the middle chose a corner blindly. Participants in all other corners then performed an exercise chosen by rolling dice. In this example, the chosen exercise was six knee bends:

Observation May 2, 2019: People started doing knee bending movements. Most of us did something with our knees pushing forward. Sade then let us know that meant squats, so we did squats. I did my squats. Upon noticing me, Jasmine said, “Miss Nneka doing real squats. I don’t know what the rest of y’all are doing.”
In the game, Jasmine compared the girls’ actions to a standard and let them know that they were failing to meet it immediately. Jasmine also had a habit of recording people on video in order to remark their behaviors. On a separate dance day, Jasmine had disengaged from the activity. Because we leaders had not set out the phone basket, she still had access to her phone. She then announced to those who were actively participating, “You know I was filming y’all right?” There was clear evidence of this practice when in circle she shared a video she made in the classroom of Coco’s laugh, which she found particularly odd.

Observation May 16, 2019: Coco was laughing uncontrollably [during program], which prompted Jasmine to show a video of Coco being “creepy” in class. It was a video taken on her cell phone of Coco sitting at her desk . . . . She lets out a rapid-fire laugh, slightly deeper than her usual laugh. . . . On the video Coco continues laughing. The girls in the room for program begin laughing out loud as well.

Heaven and Coco were concerned about the girls in the room watching them. However, this current era in technology affords onlookers the ability to capture moments on film. While there was the risk of having instantaneous critiques of their actions in the room, there was also the risk of their behavior being captured, re-viewed, and then further critiqued by a larger audience.

In fact, the larger audience of other peers within the school added to some of these surveillance fears. During one of our program sessions, I had the girls choose the location of our kickball game. When we were almost there, they turned around and thought better of it. That location was under the windows of the middle school boys’ bathrooms, where students often yelled at and directed comments to those they observed below. The practice of yelling out of windows was common and frequent, especially when our group was the only one outdoors at the time. Surveillance risk often led girls to avoid physical activity (Casey et al., 2016; Yungblut et
al., 2012; Hills, 2007). However, in this case the girls chose to alter their environment in order to continue with the game and reduce the possible risk.

**Monitoring**

While much of this discussion of surveillance has been associated with criticism, not all monitoring of others’ behavior was like this. More benignly, the girls would often surveil each other in order to gauge how they should make decisions surrounding the activity. At the conclusion of circle, adult leaders provided the options of the day and put it to a vote. Blind voting was the expectation, but often the girls’ eyes were open as they made their choices. They would be peeking, closing their eyes and then opening them to take a look around. At times they would just squint and not fully close their eyes. Other times their eyes would be wide open as they looked and took note of who voted for what. Jasmine in particular also frequently voted twice, raising her hand for each of the proposed options.

**Observation May 16, 2019:** Coco is for some reason on the floor in the middle of the circle. Coco covers her eyes with her arm and calls for the vote. “Raise your hand if you want to do juggling.” She raises her hand, along with Yani, and three of the girls. Then she calls for Capture the Flag. Jasmine looks around first. I catch her and we laugh. Yani says, “You have to vote.” Jasmine says, “I don’t care [which game gets picked].” That she did not care which game eventually was chosen was her explanation as to why she had not voted in this case. In the observation above, she withheld her vote for Capture the Flag, which would have been the losing option. In other cases, however, she would scan the room and raise her hand for whichever option the majority had chosen, even if that meant she had to vote a second time. In contrast to the those acts of surveillance which led to criticism, monitoring how others voted is different in nature with the focus on conforming one’s own behaviors to those of
her peers. Rather than a focus on other peers’ behaviors per se, the behavior reflects an act of information seeking in order the make personal decision that aligns with other group members. In this regard, girls’ decisions to monitor others’ behaviors was of trying to be accepted themselves.

Early adolescence is a time in which the desire to be liked by others becomes increasingly strong (Ellis & Zarbatany, 2017). As such adolescents strive for conformity as a means of being accepted. This influence is moderated by the strength of the relationships. As Jasmine had strong relationships with the girls in the room, it is likely that her behavior was driven by the desire to make a choice that conformed to the rest of her peers and thus made her more acceptable. In this way, while surveillance often made girls uncomfortable because the accompanying criticism, monitoring others in the circle helped to make those who were peeking more comfortable.

**Theme 4: Obstruction**

The theme of obstruction refers to a range of behaviors that affected the girls’ ability to take an action or fully participate in activities. This included intentional actions and behavior that unintentionally obstructed, typically noncooperative or disruptive behaviors, as well. Ultimately these behaviors stopped girls’ pursuit of a particular goal behavior such as fully participating in activities.

**Intentional obstruction**

Girls intentionally obstructed others when they either singularly or collectively worked to block their peers’ actions. Two examples of this behavior occurred when the target peer did not conform to the expectations of the group. On one occasion, Sh’nana was present in the school but did not arrive at program until it was nearly over. Expectations were such that the girls were
to attend program if they were present in the school. Sade describes how that situation was handled:

Sh’nana was in school today. She came down afterwards. I sent her up because if you are not here on time and you know you are supposed to be here, you go back to class. So, she [said] “Oh I forgot.” “Well go back to where you were, and let [teacher] know that you need to stay there until the end of the day . . .” And she was like “But Miss.” “Nope, nope.” And it helped out though because the girls actually backed it. Coco was like “No, you know you were supposed to be here . . . Unh unh, good bye because we was all here on time and the program is basically over. You missed everything so go back to where you came from.” (Sade)

Recognizing that her own behavior had conformed to the norms of the group, Coco backed Sade by obstructing Sh’nana. Sade’s role as an adult leader was pivotal in the encounter. She modeled the behavior for Coco who then, by supplying her voice, reinforced the expectations set by the adults.

In the second example of intentional obstruction, the action again was rooted in an adult-developed expectation, this time surrounding snack. A snack was provided as an incentive to girls who arrived in the room by 2:35; the program official start time was 2:30. Providing a snack at a specific and limited time was implemented to encourage consistent and on time attendance. Adults refused the snack to anyone who arrived past the designated time. Because some of the girls considered helping teachers to be a valid excuse to be late, we needed to decide whether to make an exception for this reason. When a couple of the girls who were working on a bulletin board arrived late, the other girls voted on whether their peers should have the snack. Sade explained this event:
The first day we put it out to the girls and they voted no . . . they should not get a snack.

So, then the next day when … some of those girls who voted no came late and they didn't get the snacks, roles were reversed and from there on we were consistent. Like, “No snack. 2:35 is the absolute cut off, I don't care what you're doing, you know what time you need to be down here.” (Sade)

Working in concert with the adult leader the girls co-constructed the norms of the group by blocking the execution of behaviors which ran counter to them. Through the power of their collective vote, they redefined the expectation, specifying that there were no exceptions. This then informed adult practices around enforcement. By choosing to vote “No,” they not only blocked the receipt of snack that day but also all those future attempts under similar conditions.

**Unintentional obstruction**

In contrast to these intentional efforts, unintentionally obstructive behavior prevented the girls’ full participation in activities as well. Generally, the girls would have preferred to have everyone participate in the games and activities. When others chose not to do so, that frustrated those who were participating. Coco stated, “The only thing I don't like about Strong is when these little girls be complaining, talking about some, "I don't wanna do this . . . ."

More specifically, when other girls complained rather than trying the activity, it slowed our progress as a group. Sh’nana reflected on what we, as program leaders, should do in response. In the session prior to her interview, we began late as girls spent an extended time in the hallway wavering between deciding to go to Fun Friday, which was a school run free time incentive, or the program. When they eventually showed up to the room, they talked for an extended time, did not respond to calls to start the activities, and gave limited responses to the feelings circle prompt. Rather than being able to move to a vote on the options, Alexandra and I
had to express our disappointment and reinforce our expectations for their behavior. I decided to ask Sh’nana her thoughts on what happened:

Nneka: What are your thoughts on that? ’Cause it took us a while to get into [the activity].

Sh’nana: Man, they should just be kicked out.

Nneka: Wait, why?

Sh’nana: ’Cause they be taking forever. They be slowing us down.

Coco expressed similar frustrations on how the behavior affected the leaders’ ability to run program:

People will always be talking. Like, if there's a time, where we need to be, like, be quiet, and like listen to, like, you or Miss Sade or anybody, they don't shut up, they stay talking.

And then when somebody tell them to be quiet or shut up, then they catch a[n] attitude (Coco).

Off task behavior made it difficult to begin activities, and it also affected the girls’ enjoyment once activities were started. In particular, when other girls were not following directions it affected how all of the girls were able to engage in the games. As an example, Coco and Blueberry explained why they were annoyed by others’ disengagement in the game of Mat Tag.

The game of Mat Tag is a version of dodgeball with runners and throwers. Runners move base to base around the circle. Bases serve as safety zones; however, there are limits to how many runners can be on a base at a time. Throwers can hit runners with the ball only if they are off the bases in the running lanes. When I asked the girls to explain why they like the game, they voiced their annoyance with the other players:
Coco: It was fun, but it was annoying when they just kept standing there. They're not moving.

Jasmine: I know what you’re talking about.

Blueberry: Yes, everybody kept staying in the same base over and over again, not moving. Then once they go to hit them, whatever, they just stand there on the base and they would never get out.

Nneka: So, people refused to follow the rules, and they just stood there.

Blueberry: Yes.

Nneka: What made it annoying because you could just keep running around them?

Coco: No, because we're in the middle trying to hit the people. They don't move, so how are you going to hit them if they don’t move? You can’t.

If runners refuse to move, throwers can never legally hit them with the ball and get them out. When girls stay on base it reduces the number of targets for the throwers, the flow of the game, and ultimately their enjoyment.

Additionally, when girls refuse to follow the rules of the activity, that prompted leaders to intervene in the activity to reinforce the importance of working as a group. The warmup was an activity where unity in action was expected. Those who refused to cooperate then forced the entire group to repeat or stay at the exercise. I recalled one of these occasions where a girl refused to be in sync with others:

Nneka: When we were doing our warm up stretching and … she wasn't doing it, and you kept asking her to do it. And so, she got so livid that, she threw her phone.

Sade: Yes.

Nneka: And then stormed out.
Sade: I don't know how that helps her at all.

Disruptive behavior of this nature was the reason why Jordan, Jasmine, and Blueberry were unhappy with the experience:

Jasmine: No that, I didn't like that because-- Let me tell you why… because if one person -

Jordan: Messed up, we got to start it all over.

Jasmine: …Yeah, we had to like go on sync with everybody and if one person messed up or like everybody else is exercising and one person's not exercising, we had to wait for them. Like, "I'm finna smack you in your face, come on." I'd be getting mad.

Blueberry: Like when it was going too slow, I used to hate that too.

Jasmine: Yes.

Jordan: Yes, you're like, "Come on." … Well, some people would just be acting stupid or just be sitting out. Like, “Get up!”

Many of the behaviors the girls deemed most frustrating were primarily from a select group of girls whom Sade described as having strong personalities, that is strong influence over their peer group. Sade explains:

We looked and saw in our group, some girls that in the past would not have been there.

… And they were the popular mean girls. And so, this year, they opted into the program.

And I also-- So I think (Zahara) was the ringleader in that as well as (Tierra). (Sade)

In the previous year of programming, these girls had quit, taking their friends with them, thinking that “the program is dumb,” according to Sade. However, this year they became involved, bringing along their friends, including Jordan and Jasmine.
While their popularity meant more girls became interested in and joined the program, their influence also shaped the mood of the group overall. Yani spoke to how their presence and ultimate departure affected the group dynamic:

I noticed a shift in dynamics [occurred] when (Zahara) stopped going. …There was less fighting at least physical fighting. Um, so I think overall, the group benefited from her-unfortunately, from her, like not being a part of the group anymore . . . I felt like a lot of the students, in the beginning, followed her lead. If she no longer wanted to play, she made it un-fun for those who were having fun. So, people didn't want to play anymore. (Yani)

Yani observed Zahara’s leaving the group to have a positive impact in terms of a reduction in physically aggressive behavior, or play hitting and pushing. Because Zahara had a strong influence over the other girls, she could shape the behaviors of her peers by the actions she displayed. When she continued to play others found the game “un-fun” because of her aggressive physical contact and antagonistic behaviors. When she chose to sit out, other girls would follow and sit out as well or had their play interrupted by her disruptive behaviors.

Not only exerting influence by aggressive actions, Zahara and other girls’ moods could also shape the room. Sade’s observation was that the group dynamic was influenced by their attitudes, particularly (Tierra)’s because “when she was having a good day, it was all good. And when she was having a bad day, it was all bad.” Sade made a similar observation of Asia, another strong personality. She could also shift the dynamic of the group when she became “very standoffish in her bad days.” Yani noted how this behavior affected the group as well:
Yes, it was a little different today, but (Asia) was here. When she's around, …she gets pretty physical sometimes. She was, like, a huge distraction for some of the girls. She was throwing her water bottle, hitting people. So, I felt that was very distracting. (Yani)

Asia’s off task behavior became a distraction as she sought to entertain herself while disengaged from the activity. Those who were on task were less able to focus on the activity as they were hit by Asia’s water bottle. Yani continued to explain that she had to ask Asia to stop multiple times. As she noted, program was “different” because Asia was present, whereas her attendance was infrequent. Her frequent absence meant that many of these behaviors were a rarer occurrence.

While the absence of these girls, according to Sade, “affected programming for the better,” they were not the only ones whose moods could shift the programming environment. Other regular participants could also “just explode” when they were frustrated by an interaction with a peer or adult. This tendency led to a heated exchange between Heaven and another participant. As they engaged back and forth, other girls began to take note and were making jokes and comments on the side. It became a distraction that prevented us from continuing the planned activity until I intervened, prompting the participant to choose to walk out of the room.

The girls spoke of finding similarly obstructive behaviors in other settings. They talked about when they were all required to sit quietly in their seats to make up for the time their class was “talking too much:”

Jasmine: If we talked, [the teacher] started the time over. We could not move, we could not blink, we could not breathe. … And if the chair go like this, “Start over. Start over.”


Blueberry: No, that’s because some people—
Jordan: When one person really coughed, the other person wanna try to copy that person. And yeah, they be acting stupid.

Blueberry: Yeah, then they all start laughing.

The students had to remain in the room collectively in silence until the timer ran out. The behavior of their classroom peers affected their ability to leave the room. Ultimately this affected their arrival at program which as Jasmine noted, “Like that? She's making me miss all my snack.”

Boys specifically were pointed out for behaviors that obstructed the class from accomplishing a goal. A particularly frustrating example was graduation practice:

Jasmine Miss, we don't- I don't want to go to practice.

Jordan: I really don't either. I'm tired of yelling at these dumba- I meant I’m just tired of yellin’ at them.

Jasmine: Yeah, you get tired of yellin’ at them

Having heard them vent about the boys’ behavior on multiple occasions, I went to observe the practice. I sat inside in clear view and noted no major issues. I told the girls this.

Jasmine: I was like, "What the heck?" I was like, "She was supposed to be here to see how bad the boys are. We doing good."

Jordan echoed this shock, reiterating that the boys usually are off task:

Jordan: If you would have came on Thursday, it got worse. I was like, "Yo." You need to come again so it can be good. You need to come watch it again. … Because every time when you- when you come- every time when you come, they want to do good, but when you ain't here, they want to be acting stupid like they don't know how to do two steps.
In a subsequent observation, this time from a hidden viewing point, I could confirm that boys in fact were off task. Interestingly, the ones I noted were those the girls had considered as their closest friends. These boys were playing around, dancing, and distracted in line while the girls stood in the row ready to walk down the aisles. Behavior such as this meant the girls needed to repeat or halt planned activities. This obstructed their pursuit of the desired goal behavior, but it was not intentionally directed at blocking the actions of a specific individual. However, such intentionality was at times present in the girls’ behavior in program.

**Theme 5: Relationships**

The theme of relationships references the girls’ connections to other group members, specifically the influence of those connections on their behavior. In this regard, I have considered the girls’ perceptions of the program as a site of connection to build relationships and the role of relationships in shaping behavior, both positively and negatively.

**Relationship building**

When explaining their sociograms and relationship circles, it was frequently asserted that the girls “used to not like” many of those they now regard as their closest friends. Sh’nana speaks about her original feelings about her best friend, saying, “At first I didn't like her. I hated her.” Similarly, speaking of one of her best friends, Coco also formerly disliked the girl:

Nneka: Wait, you didn't like [Liseth] in the fourth grade but now y'all are cool? … So what changed?

Coco: Well, I didn't know her in fourth grade. I met her in fourth grade but I didn't know her know her like that, and I did not like her. But now I like her, and then I tell her a lot of stuff…
Coco’s use of the term “know her know her” reflects her understanding of who Liseth was. With that greater knowledge, Coco was able to move from disliking Liseth to considering her one of her best friends. In each case having time to get to know them helped them see a peer for who she really was. Just as having the time to get know other girls helped Sh’nana and Coco move towards friendships, the same trend was seen among group members. Jasmine, Jordan, Blueberry, and Coco were frequently together in the school. However, in their focus group they revealed they had not always been so close. While Jasmine and Jordan had known each other “all their life,” Jordan, Coco and Jasmine did not like each other in the beginning. Speaking of Jasmine, Coco said, “Yeah. Jasmine, I met her in fourth grade. You were so mean. You looked just rude.” The feeling was mutual. Remembering Coco back then, Jordan and Jasmine noted that they disliked her based on the people she hung around:

Jordan: I didn't like you in fifth grade. ’cause the people who was just around, I didn't like them and they just would act … just like too good. I used to be like, "I don't like her."

Jordan claimed that the people surrounding Coco then led her to think, “I don’t like her,” when she saw Coco. They were “too good,” meaning, as Coco explains, that “they think that they better than everyone else. They acted like they know it all and stuff like that.” Jordan and Jasmine made assumptions about who Coco was and ultimately disliked her based on her friend group.

Though they disliked each other based on their assumptions, sharing classes and more time with each other allowed them to get closer. In a similar way, they had originally made assumptions about Blueberry. Prior to meeting Blueberry, Jasmine knew of her on social media, SnapChat, and did not like her:
Jasmine: I didn't like her for no reason. I just heard stuff about her, but now I know her. She's a cool person. I feel like I knew her my whole life.

Nneka: So you knew her and didn't like her and then you met her in real life?...

Jasmine: Mm-hmm. I was like, “actually a good person.” Because when I used to walk home from school, she living on (X) Street, and I used to see her, and she used to look at me stank. I used to be like [sucks teeth] … ‘cause she was at Abernathy, and some Evers kids didn’t like Abernathy kids.

Because Blueberry had gone to Abernathy, she was considered to be part of the outgroup and someone they should dislike. As Jasmine herself admits, there was no reason for her to dislike her, beyond her previous affiliation with Abernathy. A group level norm among the students of the school was creating a distinction between “Evers kids” and “Abernathy kids” as collective units, shaping Jasmine’s initial perceptions and interactions with Blueberry. However, just as sharing classes worked in other cases, time in Strong Ties helped the girls get know Blueberry and realize her true colors:

I just had a bad feeling about her like when I, like first saw her. Like I thought she was like- she looked rude. But then she was quiet, and then I met her in Strong and we started getting close…(Coco)

The program provided the space for the girls to get to know Blueberry better. As Coco developed a series of interactions with Blueberry, she was able to perceive her and their relationship more positively. Figure 5.1 shows the girls connections with each other
As the relative newcomer, Blueberry saw participating in Strong Ties as a means to form new relationships with other girls. She said that she joined the program specifically, “So I could get to know everybody that's in it better.” Heaven and Sh’nana also recognized that participation allowed them the opportunity to make friends with people they ordinarily would not have connected with:

Heaven: And I made friends. I was never talking to Sh’nana

Sh’nana: Yes. You do make friends when you come down here. Cuz half these kids I didn’t talk to.
Heaven now considers Sh’nana as one of the people she is very close to. Without the opportunity to get to know her better that level of connection would likely not have formed.

Based on the relationship building in Strong Ties, Sh’nana proposed a change to the program. Strong Ties was restricted only eighth grade girls. She suggested for the following year that seventh graders be included. I asked what the addition of seventh graders would have changed about the program:

'Cause, like, they might look up to you like a big sister or something. Like if you're in seventh grade, and you’re like, "Oh, I really look up to this person that’s in eighth grade, but I don't know if they would talk to me," then that will give you, like, an opportunity to actually communicate and get them to understand that, "Oh, she looks up to me like a big sister. So now I have to really play the part.” (Sh’nana)

Because you can get to know others better in the program, then it follows it provides an excellent opportunity to support cross grade friendships and the move towards supportive peer friendships. This finding is echoed by those from participants of non-sport youth development programs (Fredricks, Hackett, & Bregman, 2010). The ability to get to know and befriend girls one would not normally interact with is a key part of the appeal of the program.

Their friendships, and the possibility of forming new ones, were part of the rationale for Jasmine, Jordan and Blueberry to begin attending Strong Ties. Jasmine and Jordan had in the previous year joined but quickly discontinued participation in program. However, this year they became more involved. In stating why they chose to start coming to Strong, it was because all of their friends were going:

Nneka: Why did y'all start coming to Strong Ties?

Jasmine: Because everybody else is going and I didn't have nothing else to do.
Jordan: No for real

Jasmine: I swear.

The girls continued to explain, listing all of their friends who were in the program:

Jasmine: I saw everybody comin' in and I said, "Where they going?" They say, Strong." I was like-

Jordan: “Oh, I'm going to Strong.”

Jasmine: Yeah, yeah.

Jasmine and Jordan noticed their friends leaving to participate in the program. Their display of leaving to the room to attend program influenced the girls’ decision to join as well. Jordan also acknowledged that her close friend directly encouraged her to participate:

No, this how I went because I wasn't going to come. … And then (Tierra) see me in the hallway. (Tierra) pulled me and she said, "Come on Jordan, come to Strong with us."

And I was like all right. And then ever since I just kept going and I'm still going. (Jordan)

Though girls recognized the positive influence of their friendships to join the program, they also noted that strained relationships with group members negatively impacted their participation.

**Strained relationships**

Those negative perceptions of others in the group affected their sense of the climate. Coco explained how other girls sometimes made her feel uncomfortable:

Coco: What makes me feel uncomfortable is that there's some girls in there that you cannot trust. That's why you got to be careful what you say around them because some people might have something to say back, and some people might just tell other people.
Jordan pointed out, “Miss, but some girls, you can't tell them a lot of things, 'cause they run they mouth too much.” Heaven would say of the girls, “some of them selfish” which was “because I don't like some of- some of- I don't like some of them. Some of them.”

Perceptions of “some girls” affected then how group members chose to interact. Distrusting or disliking others in the group could lead them to refuse to engage or attend program. I had frequently observed Heaven sitting away from the group and disengaged from the activity. I asked her why that was. She said it was “Because sometimes they have someone in the group I don't want to talk to or they annoy me.”

Making participation decisions based on relationships with others in the group was referenced by others as well. I gave the girls a hypothetical question based on some of the practices we as leaders employed in order to make teams for the games. In particular the girls were asked how they would react in a situation where we chose their partners for them:

Coco: Miss, I like to choose my own partner, because if I don't get along with that person, or if I have an issue with that person- I would rather be in a team or have a partner that I get along with, and that I talk to.

Nneka: If you were partnered up with somebody you didn't talk to, then what?

Coco: We wouldn't talk, and there would be nothing to do. We would do it on [our own] by ourselves.

Coco implied that she would simply not engage with a partner if they did not get along. In their focus group, when they were asked the question, they emphasized this rationale by speaking to how they believed their peers would respond. Sh’nana conjectured, “Everybody will get mad ‘cause they wanna be with their friends.” Heaven added, “And some of them not talk to each other.” Because girls would not be with their friends, and potentially be forced to work with
people they may have issues with, they would protest the team makeups. Jasmine, for her part, would also potentially “just switch with somebody else” if she was partnered with people she didn’t approve of. However, when asked why, her reasoning was based on her perception of their skill level.

Though they had the opportunity to interact and work with different peers, they would at times refuse. The girls’ perceptions of their peers, based on the pattern of their previous interactions during the day and throughout the school year, colored their interactions in the program. Because they were aware that “some girls” proved themselves untrustworthy in other parts of the day, these perceptions were carried with them into the programming room. Rather than learning more about the girl and building a new history of interactions, the girls chose to distance themselves from each other instead as a way to avoid conflict. These observations align with previous findings that strained relationships influenced activity participation (see Slater & Tiggeman, 2010). However, this case differs in that these issues did not originate within the program, but were the result of outside issues trickling in. These observations again suggest the importance of out of program time in shaping the relationship context.

When adults were asked what they observed of patterns of engagement and disengagement, they noted issues between girls as likely being reasons for their decisions to attend or not attend. Yani and Sade spoke to the presence of “drama,” or ongoing issues in the relationships between members that had developed during other parts of their day:

Yani: Okay, I’m assuming it's like drama, either they have an issue with someone in the program that don't wanna come in that day… .
Sade: Um, some things that I've heard them say in those moments are, there's-- Like you said, there's drama. Like they [say] “There are some girls” and they won't be specific, but “some girls have issues with other girls and we're all in the same program together.”

Yani and Sade recognized the ways in which “drama” in the girls’ relationships in other parts of the school day could trickle in and influence their participation choices. In a particularly strong example, the outside issues led some to opt out of the program all together. One participant quit because of issues with a then continuing participant:

Sade: She had an issue with (Tierra). And (Tierra) has more girls in the program on her side than (Trinity), who was new to the school this year. And so, while (Trinity) was a great participant, and she was heavy on the side of positivity- Um, it just- it’s unbearable to be in a room where you're not liked. And then-- And that you're not liked by one person but it seems like you're not liked by many, even though had that originator not been there, it would have been all good.

While that was an extreme example, throughout the program year, attendance had been inconsistent overall largely due to the issues girls had with each other outside of program. With the passage of time these began to resolve and attendance became more regular. During one of the debriefings, Sade made the note that the girls “like each other again,” referencing the previous issues that had been affecting attendance engagement:

We went through that rough period where no one was showing up to program and it was because there was a lot of outside drama that eventually trickled into program when [this participant] and [that participant] got into that argument…. But there was also a period of time where Jordan wasn’t friends with someone. [Another girl] wasn’t friends with someone. And those were all, it was circulating throughout the group who and who was
not friends. … So now that they’re all friends again, I feel like they’re okay with being around each other. And um that is why we’re getting a higher attendance. (Sade)

Sade made the direct link between a change in the relationships between the girls (a reduction in relational issues) and the overall attendance of the group. Healthy and positive relationships were connected to consistent attendance, whereas strained relationships were the cause for many of the absences. Brown (2004) points out that conflict is common in adolescent friendships and may be helpful in their relationship and identity development. These types of disagreements within friendships tend to diminish as adolescents mature. The natural maturation processes may have been contributing factors to the reduction in relationship issues as the year progressed.

**Race/Ethnicity**

Race also featured as an influence on how girls perceived one another. Ethnicity was used to make assumptions about others in order understand their actions and distance the groups. Jasmine and Jordan, in particular, made these characterizations to explain Coco’s attitude problem. As they explain it, the Hispanics have an attitude:

Jasmine: I don't mean to be racist, but I think it's all the Hispanics with bad attitude ’cause if you look at it, it's all the Hispanics.

Jordan: Y’all crazy, like, y’all got some psycho. …

Nneka: There's definitely Black people who get attitude.

Jasmine: They, but not like that. …If you look at us versus their attitude. They like outer space in Mars and we like down with the dead people….

Jordan: I have a[n] attitude but I know how to control it, and I don't be getting attitude.

Jasmine: They get offensive over every little thing. You say one thing, like, they be like “nananana.” They be ready to have a whole argument.
Jasmine asserted that Black people’s attitudes are down with the dead people while Hispanics’ are in space, analogizing the difference between the levels of their attitudes on a scale. Jasmine also believes that her presentation of an attitude is different, because she is able to control. While observationally, both Black and Hispanic students exhibited signs of what they would constitute as an attitude (disrespect, arguing, getting mad at peers), it was assumed that Hispanic students were the main perpetrators and had “attitude problems.” This ethnicity-based served to distance them, as Black students, from the stereotypes they held of the Hispanic students.

Black students in particular noted the ethnic differences of others. In describing why Sh’nana was in her inner circle on her sociogram, Heaven explains one of the reasons as “Just like today, she hate the same girl I hate. That's a little little [sic] black power.” In other examples, skin color was referenced, such as Jasmine referencing another game player, who had exclaimed she was playing like a Jamaican. Jasmine corrected her by saying that it was instead “like a light-skinned Jamaican, the worst kind.” Other references were made amongst the group of “team light skin,” the darkness of the skin of outside peers, and Blueberry as being “Black,” indicating that she did not fully meet the criteria because of her heritage as both Hispanic and Black. Black students in particular were aware of these differences, emphasizing them in their talk and creating further mental distance between groups.

The formation of ingroups and outgroups can be a part of healthy identity development (Brown, 2004). By seeking to create distance and understand and categorize outgroup members, girls could simply be trying to better come terms of what their Black identity means in a majority Hispanic school. Rather than only creating distance and separation, this behavior could be linked to the establishment of a personal racial identity.
Theme 6: Ego Orientation

The theme of ego orientation deals with a focus on winning and the effects of that mentality. Ego orientation means that participants focus on comparison to others and shows of superiority (Gould, Flett, & Lauer, 2012). Evidence of this orientation is demonstrated in the girls’ play behaviors and the exchanges they have surrounding games. This includes rule infringement and verbal aggression.

Rule infringement

Rule infringement included times girls actively violated the rules of the game to benefit themselves or their team. I distinguish this behavior from strategic tactics such as communicating with teammates, and planning offensive or defensive efforts. Infringement includes those that violate the expressed rules and the spirit of the game. As an example, during a game of Flag Tag, strategic play included verbal and nonverbal communication to direct teammates towards opponents who still had remaining flags and also used teamwork to “double team” an opposing player and block an escape route. Within the rules, flags were to have been placed in a pocket with one end extended, pulled through a belt loop, or placed into the top of one’s pants waistband. In all occasions the flag was to be visible and loosely adhered so that it could be pulled without restriction. In contrast, rule infringing behavior were those occasions when attempted to prevent opponents from taking their flags in ways that illegally made the task more difficult. The range of options that girls took included:

- Tied in a knot around an arm or thigh
- Stuffed into the kangaroo pouch on a hoodie
- Covered by hands
Intentionally removed from the pocket and held in the hand before the opponent reached for it

During the game, girls called this behavior out as unfair. Again, in an exchange during a focus group, Blueberry called Jasmine out for this behavior:

Blueberry: The flag game, they kept putting [the flag] inside their pants. You're supposed to leave it in your pocket or something.

Jasmine: No, I didn’t.

Blueberry: And they want to be putting it in knots to make it impossible to freaking grab it.

Jasmine: No, I did not. … Look, Miss. It was right here, so if I see her hand trying to get it, Imma block you, and when I'm blocking you, Imma take yours 'cause you're gonna be trying to take mine. You're not gonna be paying attention. You're trying to block yours.

So, while I'm blocking mines, Imma take yours, and that's your problem. You're not paying attention. So, that's not me cheating.

While Blueberry listed a number of rule infringements that occurred, Jasmine asserted that blocking her flag was an acceptable behavior. Because her opponent may have had an advantage, she needed to take the measure in order to win.

I had observed them having similar disagreements during play, particularly over the game of Uno. Their disagreement was centered on what were and were not legal moves to make. This was likely due to their use of different reference points for the proper set of house rules that should have guided play. In the focus group they reengaged in the disagreement. Blueberry accused Jasmine of “changing up rules.” Jasmine denied this. This continued in a back and forth argument between the two:
Jasmine: Shut up. Shut up.

Blueberry: Y'all know you don't be playing the right way.

Jasmine: Shut up, dadadada.. … She just lying. She just sad [because] she's a sore loser.

As their exchange continued, Blueberry also accused Jasmine of cheating, not just in Flag tag, but in all of the games. In return Jasmine told Blueberry to “shut up” and offers an allegation of her own: that Blueberry is just a sore loser. The entire exchange of antagonisms was based on both of their perceptions that they should be the rightful winner.

Accusations of cheating were frequent and were used to cast a shadow over the winning team. When opponents would score or win, girls would respond by alleging the other team had cheated. This mindset was most evident in Jordan and Jasmine’s response to how they would react when the other team scores:

Jordan: I be like “You cheated. Period.” … I'm going to make sure I tell you that you cheated…. Because you be cheating.

Nneka: How do you know they're cheating?

Jasmine: Y'all usually suck, how are y'all winning? They usually suck, so how are you gonna start winning now

Because the assumption was that the other team was less skilled, cheating was the only acceptable explanation for the win.

Verbal aggression

There was a consensus among the girls that they were verbally aggressive towards each other because of the nature of the competitive environment in the program. Because of this trait, Coco observed that when they interact with each other in the games, “We do it aggressively
‘cause we wanna win. And then when you don’t win, you get aggravated and then you get mad…” Other girls also spoke to the negative ways they address each other.

Sh’nana describes their language as “horrible.” Jasmine describe their interactions as rude because “we might start arguing each other and calling each other names.” Coco again explains the reason for the aggression, saying, “Some people might get mad. They might yell at another person because they think that they're not doing a good enough job playing.” Coco for her own part demonstrated this frustration in the focus group as she spoke about cup stack. The team activity required the girls to each hold their own string with all of them tied to a rubber band. They were to work together to collectively open and close the rubber band loop to pick up cups and stack them into a pyramid before the other team completed theirs. She remembered that Heaven was getting on her nerves during the activity:

Nneka: So, wait, why did you say that she was getting on your nerves with that?
Coco: . . .because obviously you know everybody got a piece of the string . . .so all of us were going one direction and then she goes another direction . . .and then she's over there trying to be the leader of it. You don't know what you're doing. Stop.

Girls did become aggravated with each other during the activity over how best to play the game. In other instances, they would get frustrated and disengage from the activity if their team were losing or they did not like how the game was going.

The girls’ negative experiences in the competitive environment align with research findings. Gould, Flett, & Lauer (2012) had found an association between negative peer experiences in ego-oriented climates. As leaders, we intentionally planned competitive activities in order to increase engagement. The competitive climate, self-driven and influenced by the types of games they were invited to play, fostered an environment for the girls to treat each other
poorly and compromise ethics in pursuit of a win. We as leaders could have been more mindful
to cultivate caring climates in order to counteract this tendency and shape more positive
experiences among the adolescent peers (Gould, Flett, & Lauer, 2012).

As time went on fewer of these instances were observed. Sade noted this likely had to do
with the coming end of the school year. Noting that the girls began to be “a lot nicer to each
other,” and speculated on the nearing of the end of their time together as the possible reason.

So, it could be the fact that they're transitioning out of the school, they realized that it's
the last couple of times that they'll be together as classmates for the most part, but I think
they were a lot nicer to each other. A lot less negative talk, … like, "They're cheating in
the game." Or, "They're doing this." So, a lot less bickering back and forth and more like
playful bickering or just playful period. (Sade)

As the weeks progressed, the girls changed the ways they were treating each other. Though there
would still remain a competitive air, there were negative peer interactions. As Sade suggests, this
may have been due to the girls’ recognition of the nearing end of the school year and thus their
time together as schoolmates before moving on to separate high schools. This may have led to an
intentional effort to be more respectful of their peers and thus a more caring climate. However,
the period of this study coincided with multiple factors which may have played a part in shifting
the climate.

There was a general shift in the relationships with each other overall, which affected their
attendance and a reduction in many of the issues discussed in the previous section. Having more
positive relationships may have colored their perceptions of and resulting interactions with peers
in game play. The change in the group composition, that is the departure of those girls who were
most disruptive throughout the program, led to a reduction in many problem behaviors. Finally,
we as leaders had begun presenting different game choices to the girls. The game options were less competitive and more collaborative as the study period wore on. For example, the girls were exposed to Kemps, a partner card game. The game requires coordination between the two partners to win and is fast paced so as to provide multiple opportunities to win within a short time frame. This became a favorite game that was often repeated. When playing that game girls expressed, what I would call, playful frustration when they did not, but it did not reach the level of bickering or in-fighting associated with Uno. Likewise, the physical games that were chosen were also more collaborative or less centered on winning. This includes Team Juggling, Four Corners Fitness, and Mat Tag. These games were either based on collaboration between players or did not lead to a clear single winner. Though girls were frustrated with each other at times, this was not centered on trying to win but playing the game together.

**Theme 7: Adults**

In so many of the observed peer interactions, there was an adult somehow involved, if merely by her sheer presence. It is not possible to fully understand the adolescent peer environment without considering this crucial element. To this end I consider the role of program structures, the adults’ involvement in play, and behavior modeling as influences on adolescent behavior.

**Structures**

Adults designed the program’s structures which became the setting for the girls’ interactions and experiences. Expectations and our consistency in reinforcing them influenced the types of behaviors the girls exhibited. Throughout the course of this observation period, I observed differences in the girls’ behavior on days where we were more lax and the days on which we appealed to consistency and stricter expectations. Our working agreement with the
girls included a “phone basket” expectation. This meant they were to store their phones there if they would be otherwise visible. However, due to our own oversight, we would forget to set it out and ask the girls to deposit their phones. By not adhering to this expectation ourselves, this opened the opportunity for Jasmine to film fellow participants and Heaven to disengage by scrolling on her phone, as pointed out under the surveillance theme of this paper.

On other occasions, I noted how my own weaker leadership style allowed the girls to disengage. On a day on which we did yoga, I began the instructional video but tried to accommodate the girls’ choices. The girls were indecisive as to which video they would prefer to follow and were thus not engaging in activity as time was wasted while they continued to scroll through the options. When Sade returned to the room, she took control of the video and instructed the girls to relax and actually listen, to be quiet, and stop talking. She was regularly hushing them if they started talking. Once the room was quiet, the girls started to relax and follow the video speaker’s instructions. The difference in our approaches as leaders led to the resulting differences in the girls’ behavior. Inconsistencies in implementation an approach across leaders can diminish the achievement of positive outcomes (Holt, Sehn, Spence, Newton & Ball, 2012). Program quality, strongly influenced by leader behavior, is a strong predictor of positive outcomes for youth (Simpkins, 2015). It follows then that by not actively demonstrating consistency across leadership approaches this diminished program quality and ultimately resulted in the negative behaviors.

As leaders, we became more mindful of the ways that structure influenced the girls’ behavior and began to implement more routines into the program. As an example, we began setting up the chairs for opening circle before the girls arrived instead of having them help arrange the room once they arrived. It was apparent how important this cue on a day when
scheduling prevented us from doing so. The programming room was in use prior to the start of Strong Ties. As a result, leaders were unable to rearrange the room before it was time to gather the girls. During that session, the girls exhibited the behaviors which led Sh’nana to pointedly tell me girls who were slowing down the start of program should be kicked out. We leaders discussed the challenges of that day in our debriefing after the program session. I wondered what had been the difference between the engagement of the day before and the disengagement that day:

Nneka: We had the chairs set up yesterday and we didn’t have them set up today. So, then it was back to the old like we’re just gonna chill at the tables instead.

Alex: I mean but now you’re picking up these clues where like now you’re like, “Okay we gotta get those chairs set up.”

Nneka: … And chairs in a circle means we’re about to do this activity.

The structure of the room was a cue to the expectations for behavior. Without that the girls congregated around the tables, engaged in a conversation, and were slow to start the planned activity.

Perhaps the change that had the most profound effect on attendance behavior was the implementation of snack and talking circle. These practices evolved as a result of our observations that hunger and the desire to socialize affected the girls’ decisions to attend and participate in program. As a result, we first decided to implement talking time structured into the first 10 minutes of each session. We also set up a visible and audible timer to cue the end of this period. We next implemented an earlier pick up time to release the girls from their classrooms and snack for those who arrived to the room by 2:35. The implementation of these practices encouraged girls to arrive earlier. It also allowed us as leaders to acknowledge their needs and
adapt the program to address them. In doing so, we adults influenced their attendance and engagement choices, thus altering the environment in which they would interact with their peers.

Clear and consistent structure is one of the essential components of positive youth development settings (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). The environment should be predictable and stable and rules should be easily understood. Discipline should be consistent, with limits regularly enforced. The structure of the program must be balanced with opportunities for autonomy and independence. Youth, especially older adolescents should able to take active roles in setting rules and expectations. The best environments are those that give them opportunities for input but emphasize rule adherence (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). By increasing consistency in leadership approaches, tending to the room set-up, and providing daily snack and talking time, we were able to provide more structure while taking into account the girls’ needs and wants. The framework holds that these practices should have led to more positive outcomes for the girls.

**Adult involvement**

In addition to creating structures we also tempered the environment by our involvement in the games. This play shaped the girls’ perceptions of the adults. This led to the frequent refrain throughout this study: Miss Sade be cheatin’. The narrative, that Miss Sade and other adults cheat in the games, recurred throughout the interviews as a strong memory:

Nneka: Are there any things you really enjoy [about program]?

Sh’nana: Miss Sade cheatin’

Jasmine: No, cuz that’s not fair because she really be cheatin’ [laughter]

Sh’nana: [giggles] I am not the only one. Miss Sade- Right she be cheatin’

Jordan: Miss Nneka [indicating that I also cheat]
Similar to the accusations among their peers, claiming that we were cheating was also an explanation of our frequent wins. However, this perception was not accompanied by the frustration when adolescents cheated but a perception of fun:

Sh’nana: Man, I told my mom that Miss Sade be cheating

Nneka: Did you really?

Sh’nana: Yeah, I told her she be cheating in the game, but, like, it be fun, and then like I just tell them that I have fun.

Adults’ participation in the games, particularly Sade’s, led to a friendly rivalry. Finally scoring against or beating Sade’s team would lead them to celebrate the victory; this is not something they would do if the adults weren’t involved. Sh’nana in particular said that if Sade were not there during the games, “It won’t be fun. … Because we won't be like, ‘Ah, you cheated Miss Sade,’” or "Ah, we won.’” She later explained that she would not behave that way with the other girls because “they boring.” She spoke more about why Sade made the game fun, referring to her “cheating:”

And times that we do [sit out] is because everybody feels like when Miss Sade is not there it won’t be more fun. I'm sorry, but y'all be cheatin’. She be hiding cards and stuff especially that dice game where you gotta pick up. You gotta pass it left or keep your card or put it in the middle, man she be having it the- How do you win at the end of the game? She be doing a little bit voodoo. (Sh’nana)

Though seemingly accusatory, Sh’nana labeled Sade as a cheater while recognizing her full involvement in the games made them more enjoyable. These instances of “cheating” were memories of playing with the adults and the fun of those games.
The involvement of the adults in the game also provided an opportunity to build or extend relationships between adults and youth. As I interviewed the girls it became evident that playing the games was a shared experience between us and source of conversation. In speaking about their favorite games, they would take the opportunity to remember those events or playfully tease me.

In speaking about kickball, Jasmine took the opportunity to point out my frequent membership on the losing team, saying “We go kick the ball and then you [pointing at me] don’t be catching it so I can turn into my other [base]” and then going on to remember how they won the game. Likewise, Sh’nana engaged me in a friendly back and forth when she discussed her reasons for liking the game of Knockdown. She explained the factors that get her into the game were “‘Cause how you be moving around and, once again, Miss Sade would be cheating, and Miss Nneka team be losing.” I for my part pointed out, “That's a lie. …My team is down. We do not lose.”

Within the interview setting Jasmine and Sh’nana took the opportunity to re-engage their relationships with me through the shared experience of the game and teasing. The “cheating” of the adults, or rather our intentional involvement, in the games shaped the playing environment and thus the girls’ experiences in the game. When adults are active participants in the program, it strengthens their relationships with the youth participants (Duerden & Gillard, 2011). Playing alongside participants levels the playing field in terms of control, which builds horizontal adult-youth relationships rather than vertical as comes with a power dynamic. Our playing also served the function of allowing us to further enter into relationship with the girls and foster a sense of connection and warmth that should characterize supportive relationships in the youth development space (Eccles & Gootman, 2002).
Behavior Modeling

Our involvement in the games gives way to an additional consideration; that is of us, adults, as models for behavior. As Nicole reflected on the times when the girls were most engaged, this coincided with when we ourselves were also more engaged in the activity:

Nicole: Yeah, we went outside and one day, and actually this kind of connects to my own behavior too. I felt like on the days in which we were kind of like, “No, this is what we're doing,” or there was like excitement around it and buy in from us that the girls were more participatory on that day.

In her observation, adult enthusiasm about the activity encouraged the girls to participate. When we remained steadfast to the plan rather than wavering, the girls’ response was stronger. She contrasted the level of engagement on a day where multiple adults were “active and enthusiastic participants” with a day that the girls became disengaged from the activity. On the day when we played Flag Tag, there were limited flags available so that Nicole was the only adult with a flag and involved in the game. The game lasted for only minutes before each girl one by one went inside for water, not returning to the game. She described the participation as “lackluster.” In contrast, the day on which there were two activity options, each with adult participation, there was higher engagement. She reflected on this:

I don't know, again, if it's just um, good chance that on the days that the adults were kind of enthusiastic participants that the girls were also ready that day or if there was something to be said about kind of this idea or this energy that can be sparked among the group or if the girls are seeing that modeled by the people who are running the group, if they are kind of more apt to get with it. (Nicole)
Nicole theorized that our own level of engagement may influence the girls’ decisions to become or stay engaged. She also pondered whether there were a “spark” that was ignited by our participation. Sade expanded upon this idea by considering that the involvement of adults improves the atmosphere of the games by reducing potential conflict and allowing more fun:

I think when we are involved, as program leaders . . . it's more engaging for them…

When we are not involved, I think, they tend to bicker with each other more, because they might not understand the concepts. But when we are involved, we kind of lead them through the games, lead them through the activities, so that they understand what's absolutely happening . . . in some games we have stopped in the middle of the game and explained . . . what's actually happening. Like, "That's acceptable." Or whatnot . . . so I think they see us . . . role-modeling for them when we are interacting, but they also see us having fun. And it allows them to be fun. (Sade)

Holt and colleagues (2012) attribute a lack of supervision as a key reason why students had negative peer experiences in intramural sport. Because adults were not involved to provide instruction during the games, rules and boundaries were not established for the players leading to many of the negative behaviors. By actively getting involved in the games, the adults in this study were able to create boundaries and rules for play that improved the adolescents’ experiences in the games.

Adults involved in the game became role models for not only the tactical aspects and mediators for rules disputes; they also modeled the spirit of play. Sade would compare this with her experience playing musical chairs with older children. They were initially hesitant because, “that [game] is for babies,” but her choice to get involved as an adult opened the floor for them
to get in. When adults got involved it sent the signal to them that “It’s okay to have fun. It’s okay to be happy.”

**Theme 8: Program Space**

The girl’s perception of the program space was colored by the greater school environment. Because of the position of girls throughout the school day, the single sex exclusive nature of the program resonated strongly with them. For this reason, this theme encompasses the primacy of boys in other physical activity spaces, the desire to keep the program exclusive to the 8th grade girls and the importance of the separate space.

**Primacy of boys**

In other parts of the school day, boys dominated the physical activity space. At outdoor recesses, boys were actively engaged throwing a football or dribbling a basketball one of them had brought from home. No other materials or activities were provided. Girls would talk in groups, sitting, standing or walking around. On occasion, “bored” girls would come to our programming room, rather than be outside. During a school wide day of kickball, 8th grade boys played while most of the 8th grade girls resorted to the aforementioned behaviors. The only girls in the vicinity of the game were Sh’nana and Zahara, though they either did not get a chance or chose not to kick. The game was very heated with a lot of arguments amongst the two teams. No teachers encouraged other girls to participate. In the gym, the girls were equally sedentary:

Observation May 10, 2019: In the gym, I noticed all of the girls sitting either in the bleachers or at floor level. They sat slumped down, not speaking. Meanwhile, basketball game, full court. I thought [the girls] looked bored and asked what they preferred to do instead. “I don’t know.” I had gotten a football to play with a former participant who said she was bored. There wasn’t much space out on the sideline and she was eventually
squeezed out of the game by the boys who had begun playing with her. When I asked Coco what she wanted to do, she said, “Eat.” In response and to provide an option, Teacher X dropped down a level on the bleacher in front of Coco so she could braid her hair.

Rather than providing an option for physical activity, the teacher implicitly suggested hair braiding as a good option. When I asked a teacher if any of the girls ever played basketball with the boys, he named specific girls who would play on occasion, but added “Maybe 5 on 5 isn’t their thing.” To the contrary, many of the girls counted basketball as a sport they enjoyed and played in their free time after school. They also played horse when they previously had gym class. To quote Jasmine: “Basketball, my shot's Curry [as in NBA player Steph Curry]. I like basketball . . .”

While the girls spoke of their interest and engagement in physical activity, these options were not available to them in the school. Systematically, spaces and options were structured in such a way that they did not invite girls to participate. During outdoor recesses, no materials were provided to encourage other options for physical activity, nor were efforts made to integrate girls into games with boys. In the gym, no space was carved out for those unwilling or unable to participate in the intensely competitive game. As Sade noted of the gym, “The option is the game or nothing else and most of them sit.”

In her study of girls’ sport organizations in California, Cooky (2009) found similar ideologies shaped girls’ sport access. Girls’ lack of involvement in programs was attributed to disinterest, though there were structural, social, and logistical barriers that often precluded participation. Cooky (2009) writes, “…researchers must recognize the ways in which agency is not only freedom from constraint but also freedom to constrain. In other words, agency can be
reproductive of structural constraints and inequalities (p. 276).” When girls chose to sit out from physical activity in gym or at recess, there were simply reproducing the expectations for their behavior. Not given the materials or space to be active, they exercise their agency by sitting. Teachers then assumed girls were simply uninterested in physical activity rather than considering the nature of the environment as shaping their choices. Strong Ties then operated as a space free of those barriers to physical activity, such as gender expectations and access.

**No boys**

The girls described Strong Ties directly referencing the absence of boys. Because there were no boys, it was calmer, and a more comfortable place to exercise. Sh’nana explained why: “’Cause you're like with a whole bunch of girls and like, they understand you. Like when you have the boys, they wouldn’t understand and nothing that you’re doin’.” Having a space that was just girls allowed you to “grow and bond with [them] and they understand you.” She suggested the best way to explain the program by proposing a flyer:

Nneka: What would we put on the flyer?

Sh’nana: "Come join Strong Ties Girls. It's only for girls. Y’all boys, no."

Nneka: Why no boys?

Sh’nana: Because boys don't understand us. All they do is just talk about Fortnite, NBA '19 and NBA '18. "Oh, I beat you and dadadada--" I don't have time to listen to that. I already listen to that upstairs.

If one were to better understand the program, the most important detail is that it is just for girls. It was important to have a space set aside specific to girls’ issues where they could empathize with each other and bond through their shared interests. This was particularly important at this stage in their physical and emotional development as they were able to empathize with each
other, knowing boys would not understand their female experiences. The program also offered time away from boys whose interests and behavior annoyed them. While the absence of boys was an important feature, the program offered them exclusivity from younger girls as well. Rather than merely seeking gender segregation, the program was for just them, a specific set of 8th grade girls.

A separate space

The exclusivity of the program was apparent during an occasion when younger girls were invited to play with us. Nicole remembers this as a day where the girls perceived Sade had disrespected them by inviting others into the space:

Nicole: There were other kids that were younger girls and Sade invited them to participate and there was a group of girls that just did not like that. And they felt like it was their group. It wasn't fair that kind of these other people had been invited. …

Nneka: You, kinda saw as the root of that when they felt as though Sade was being disrespectful to them?

Nicole: Actually, what I would see as the root of that more so than that was that they was like other people in the group outside of the group. Like to me the Sade disrespecting them was an afterthought when they were in the classroom, but they were really like, they didn't want the other people to be part of that group. The younger girls.

Strong Ties was a space just for them to be together. The girls had taken ownership of the program space. Their time together was a retreat from the greater school climate, from the boys, and the expectations of their teachers. The program provided a sense of belonging and connection characteristic of the positive youth development setting (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Maintaining and holding that space was essential:
I genuinely enjoyed them and giving them the opportunity to just be themselves. Because so often in different settings they have to be what their friends want them to be or what their teachers want them to be, not who they actually are and so I appreciate that about them. When they come here, for the most part, they are who they want to be. (Sade)
CHAPTER 5

Limitations

The current study is limited by my chosen methodology and methods. The case study method is limited in its scope as it focuses on one particular program and set of participants and is bounded by time and place (Yin, 2018). Observation also tends to be time consuming and limited in scope (Brown, 2004). Specifically, as a participant observer, I was limited in the aspects of the program I was able to observe whilst involved in program activities (Yin, 2018). In other words, as I paid attention to particular interactions and events, I missed others that were occurring simultaneously. My active role as a leader diminished my ability to take notes during programming sessions (Yin, 2018), while recall bias limited what notes were written after the fact. I attempted to limit the effects of these risks through the inclusion of other adult leaders as additional sources of observations, as they provided information regarding events I was unable to observe or recall.

In addition, established groups may use a shorthand when speaking of topics familiar to them and not go into detail, which could limit what a researcher is able to understand (Brown, 2015). Participants may be more selective in sharing because they are aware of others in the group, both so as to protect themselves and to protect the image they have had up to that point (Brown, 2015). Within the context of interviews, youth participants would abruptly stop speaking when referencing their interactions with peers. During interviews, it was apparent that the girls censored themselves when they remembered my role as an adult and the recording device I was using. As was noted in the relationships section, they were intentional in referring to “some girls” rather than specific individuals. In discussing physical aggression, Blueberry was quick to respond, “No names,” when asked more about the context. While self-censoring allowed
the girls more agency to control the narrative and protect their peers, it limited what I was able to learn from them. Adults were also conscious of the recording device and may have censored what they were saying as a result. While this consciousness and awareness of the recorder may have limited the data collection in some regards, multiple data sources were used to address each of the listed limitations.

Reflexivity occurs when the participants, especially in the interview setting, are influenced by the researcher and the researcher is in turn influenced by the participants (Yin, 2018). This may lead to biases in how the participants choose to respond and the ways in which researchers interrogate and perceive the data (Yin, 2018). It is possible that adolescent participants in this study may have changed their behaviors in response to the knowledge that they were being formally observed (Brown, 2004). My role as a leader and participant-observer may have led me to manipulate the setting or activities (Yin, 2018). While it is impossible to fully erase the influence I might have had, I am aware of the possibility that my presence impacted the study. The very introduction of the research study altered the program environment by allowing for an additional space for the girls to interact with one another. Additionally, in order to collect data, I was in the school more often and had longer periods of interaction with the girls than I would have otherwise.

I most certainly was influenced by the setting. By virtue of my greater contact with school environment, I became more keenly aware of what happened throughout the school day. As a result, I found more exposure to daily events to be overwhelming. I found it challenging to witness negative youth and adult behaviors and not feel I had the power or ability to address them. Eventually, I needed to pull back from such frequent observations of the greater school environment. While limiting my observation time impacted the non-programming contexts I
would observe, it still allowed me the time to interact with the girls directly before and after our scheduled program and interview sessions.

**Theoretical Implications**

The current study provided additional details regarding the experiences of Black and Hispanic adolescent girls in a SBYD setting. As such it adds insight into the ways in which the girls’ race, gender, and circumstance shaped their participation and engagement in the program. The findings support some previous studies that relied on populations of primarily White girls (see Casey et al., 2009; Casey et al., 2016; Hills, 2007; Slater and Tiggeman, 2010) and add considerations for researchers more specific to Black and Hispanic girls.

The girls in this study raised similar concerns as those raised by the White populations interviewed in previous studies regarding the role of surveillance (Casey et al., 2016) and strained relationships (Slater & Tiggeman, 2010) in shaping behavior in sport and physical activity. Specifically, concerns about being watched by others and which peers were part of the program also led girls in this study to withdraw from activity. My interviews, along with the observational evidence, support the notion that issues around surveillance and peer participation may be pervasive, affecting girls regardless of race/ethnicity across the westernized world. However, this study provided more depth to the ways in which relationship issues may shape girls’ behavior. Specifically, it adds to the literature insight into the ways in which Black and Hispanic girls’ participation choices were shaped by their conflict with their peers, a perspective previously lacking in the literature. More pointedly, the case study design, centered on a single program, provided specific examples of how the relationships between and among the girls shaped their participation behaviors within a natural context through both observation and the girls’ own reflections.
The influence of these relationships likely influenced the girls’ desires to conform to the group, as was evident in their voting behavior. As the girls surveilled others in the room and gauged how others were voting for physical activity choices, that information allowed them to achieve conformity with peers. This may speak to the desire to maintain a favorable identity with peers by monitoring and upholding group norms (Brechwald & Prinstein, 2013). Because this form of surveillance behavior differs qualitatively from that which was used to criticized, it highlights the importance of using the peer influence model in sport-based settings to better understand the motives, stimuli, and outcomes of peer interactions. Using the model as the analysis base will provide more detail for researchers to use in their descriptions of behaviors and thus make more targeted recommendations for practitioners.

The findings also support more consideration of obstruction as a mode of influence, whereas it has previously been understudied and mostly discussed in hypothetical terms (see Brown & Larson, 2009). Specifically, the study provides some evidence to consider intentional and unintentional obstruction as distinct forms of influence peers exert over one another. Collective action (e.g. voting) and disruptive behaviors were ways that peers prevented each other from reaching a desired outcome in the present study. Voting, a decision-making tool implemented by adult leaders, was a way in which girls intentionally obstructed peers by blocking access to particular choices. Unintentional obstruction, however, was driven by the girls’ individual choices to engage in off task behavior. In this case, adults intervened and increased the effects of that influence on the girls’ peers, such as holding the entire group from moving on until all were on task. In this way, this study adds to the peer influence literature not only natural examples of obstruction, but also more consideration of the ways in which environmental structure, such as program norms and leadership styles, can encourage certain
types of peer influence behaviors. These findings provide support for the model by Brown (2013) which features adults in the after-school setting as important contextual factors shaping peer experiences. As SBYD settings are also co-constructed by adolescents and adults, it follows that studies of the peer environments of such programs must also delineate the ways in which adults shape the environment through their participation and structures. An especially strong example of this co-construction between adults and adolescents in the present program was the shaping of the ego-oriented climate. The climate of the program was shaped by the youth participants, who brought their competitive nature to each game, and also by the adults, who designed and supervised activities. In this way adolescents and adults bolstered the development of a playing environment where adolescents’ behaviors were oriented towards winning. Co-construction is especially evident in the ways the current study supports the findings of Gould and colleagues (2016) with qualitative evidence that ego-oriented climates may be connected to the development of negative peer experiences within the SBYD setting, such as more arguing, cheating, and verbal aggression.

Just as we must consider adults as important parts of the context, we must also consider the context of Black and Hispanic adolescent girls that results from their race, ethnicity, and gender. In the present study, the girls’ context was shaped by what can be considered institutionally racist practices throughout the district and within their school, including the closure and consolidation of schools, frequent turnover in district leadership, low expectations for achievement and behavior, and reduced access to resources. In addition, the girls experienced reduced access to physical activity while boys were centered in spaces where physical activity occurred (e.g. physical education class and recess). The girls were driven to the sidelines and their experiences devalued in comparison to those of their male peers. These practices affected
the girls’ experiences and the ways in which they understood their behaviors. Though their choices were limited before they were arrived in these physical activity settings, often their behaviors were understood by adults as reflective of lack of interest. In this way adults’ explicit description of the girls’ behavior demonstrated the implicit assumption that physical activity was not as important for girls’ development as for the boys who dominated the activity space. Given the findings of the present study regarding the influences of context, resources, and the role of peers and adults, researchers investigating the physical activity and sport participation choices of Black and Hispanic girls must consider how such factors not only shape their behaviors but ultimately their ability to choose to engage or not.

We must consider the factors that serve as barriers to engagement in sport and physical activity, which include racism, sexism, and their combined effects. These serve to not only influence the choices surrounding participation but also access to available opportunities. Whereas previous studies of White populations could focus solely on the influence of gender, or of race and ethnicity for boys, both must be considered when it comes to Black and Hispanic girls. In the current study, choosing to isolate effects would have meant missing the ways in which the girls’ participation behaviors were shaped by the school environment, which was in turn impacted by the racial and economic dynamics of the area. I would have failed to recognize the ways in which teachers’ gendered perceptions limited the girls’ access to physical activity (e.g. the lack of dedicated space and resources to participate, limited attempts to engage girls in physical education class, and the provision of stereotypically feminine alternative activities). The boys’ physically aggressive behavior towards the girls would not have been revealed as a motivator for participation in the program. Each of these experiences elevated the importance of
having spaces just for the girls to connect and have access to opportunities that were not otherwise provided within the school.

Intersectional approaches allow researchers to consider both the structural and experiential (May, 2015), meaning the organizational structures, culture, and social groups Black and Hispanic girls operate in and their experiences of them. While the girls were impacted by social structures, they, at times, reproduced stereotypes as they interacted with one another. In my study it was apparent that the girls used racialized and ethnic stereotypes to attribute “attitude” to Hispanic students, applied preferences to skin color, and employed gendered ideology to explain the boys’ aggressive behavior. As I discovered, an increased use of intersectional approaches can lead to greater understanding of not only Black and Hispanic girls’ sport and physical activity participation experiences but also the meaning the girls make of their experiences situated within the greater systems that impact them (see Harrison, 2017).

The findings of the current study call to the forefront the importance of investigating the impact of the girls’ intersecting identities. This level of exploration has been limited in the realm of sport and physical activity, though authors have called for its greater use (see Azzarito & Solomon, 2005; Flintoff, Fitzgerald, & Scranton, 2008). An intersectional lens has been used to explore Muslim girls’ experiences in physical activity (see Hamzeh & Oliver, 2012) and to guide Mexican-American girls in identifying barriers to their physical activity (see Oliver & Hamzeh, 2010). Hamzeh and Oliver (2012) highlighted the salience of the observance of visual, spatial, and ethical hijabs as it shaped the girls’ parents’ desires for their daughters’ physical activity and the girls’ choices. Oliver and Hamzeh (2010) highlighted what boys actively did to limit girls’ engagement in physical activity, such as refusing to let girls play or kicking them off the field. In both of these cases, religion and gender formed apparent barriers to physical activity. However,
Hamzeh and Oliver’s work did not tie the explicit, which was easily voiced by participants, to an exploration of the larger systems shaping their access as well. The present study differs in that it makes clear that race, ethnicity, gender, and age work in less explicit ways to shape the social and educational contexts of Black and Hispanic girls’ physical activity.

Though there has been limited use in the sport and physical activity literature, intersectionality has been used to explore the causes of the disproportionate number of discipline violations attributed to Black girls in schools (see Murphy, Acosta, & Kennedy-Lewis, 2013). In particular authors have highlighted the role of subjective factors shaping teachers’ perceptions and thus treatment of Black girls. Differing views of idealized femininity and culturally appropriate behavior shape teachers’ decisions to discipline Black girls for certain behaviors at higher rates. These subjective understandings combined with the greater institutional and ecological factors, such as segregation in schools, power imbalances, and reduced support services, lessen the potential for Black and Hispanic girls in educational spaces (Murphy, Acosta, & Kennedy-Lewis, 2013). A similar exploration, taking girls’ experiences into account along with an analysis of the greater structures they exist in, is warranted to truly understand the factors shaping the physical activity and sport choices of Black and Hispanic girls.

**Practical Implications**

**SBYD Programs**

Per the findings of the current study, SBYD practitioners should be conscious of the environment created in their programs. Holt and colleagues (2013) considered the type of positive youth development climate in sport-based programs, characterized by the relationships that exist between adolescents and also with adult leaders and parents. However, this meta-analysis did not address the rules and physical environment of the program and the ways they may influence peer
interactions. Instead, Brown (2013) did give this attention, considering structure, leadership, and norms as important activity characteristics that shape the ways that adolescents interact within programs. Both the relational and structural components shaped interactions in the present program. Because this was not discussed in the SBYD analysis, I will specifically note the ways program elements implemented by the adults shaped how adolescents interacted with one another followed by a focus on the relational aspects of the program.

In the present program, the institution of snack and talking time before each program session began changed the nature of the girls’ engagement. The snack and talking time were elements that altered the structure and norms of the program. By beginning with a snack, girls were more likely to arrive on time. This changed the dynamic of the program as sessions started sooner and with more of the girls present, shifting the duration of their interactions as well as who they were interacting with. The institution of the talking circle allowed adults to respond to and encourage the girls’ desire to connect with one another by providing space within the program session to do so. These changes not only impacted the ways in which the girls engaged with their peers and adult leaders in the program but also shifted attendance patterns. For these reasons, other leaders should be conscious of structural elements of program design that may shift participants’ patterns of involvement and interaction.

The norms and expectations for behavior are also key activity characteristics which may shape peer interactions (Brown, 2013). The ways in which adults in Strong Ties chose or chose not to uphold program expectations influenced the adolescent peer environment. I refer back to Heaven and Coco’s hesitance to participate in activities because others might look at them and Jasmine’s use of her phone to record others. While Heaven and Coco’s fears reflected the norms the girls noticed within their peer environment, Jasmine’s behavior was made possible because
adult leaders failed to consistently enforce the expectation of the placing phones in the phone basket and restricting their use during sessions. In this way adult mindfulness could have shifted the adolescent peer environment by discouraging certain behaviors. Specific to this example, consistent adherence to policies that limited the use of phones may have prevented some of the criticism and fear of judgement that developed. While norms surrounding criticism, surveillance, and videotaping may be especially critical for girls given the ways in which these fears influence participation (Casey et al., 2016), program leaders should work to discover those that fit best with the needs of their program and context (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). In all cases, participants should have a role in defining them, and adult leaders should ensure that they are consistently adhered to and reinforced (Perkins & Noam, 2007).

Similarly, leaders should be conscious of the norms and expectations governing the playing environment and strive to create a mastery climate, rather than an ego-oriented one, in order to avoid the rise of negative peer interactions as a result of competition (Pennington, 2019). In addition, mastery climates may be especially important for girls in terms of increasing their confidence in their abilities (Maygar & Feltz, 2003). Competitive environments can increase participants’ enjoyment of the activity, but leaders should be careful to ensure that ego-climates do not arise as a result through focusing on personal effort, self-improvement, and skill development (Pennington, 2019). When adults participate in activities alongside adolescents, they can temper some issues through positioning themselves to lead and correct behaviors within the game (Holt et al., 2012).

The climate of this SBYD program was also shaped by the relationships among youth participants. Relational issues, such as mistrust and “drama” among participants throughout the school day, affected their participation choices. These concerns caused girls to attend less
frequently and be more reluctant to engage fully in the activities. Healthy positive relationships had the opposite effect, leading girls to be more active participants. Sammett (2010) had similar findings in her study of an all-girls adventure course program. The girls recognized the program provided opportunities for healthy relationship and trust building, but there were still relational issues which affected engagement. Girls were initially mistrustful of others based on their in-school peer experiences. Additionally, one participant in particular withdrew from actively participating in the talking circles because of the relational aggression she was experiencing from others within the group (Sammett, 2010).

Because of the ways that relational issues shape participant engagement, leaders should be aware that these issues may arise within and shape their programs as well. Given this influence, Loder and Hirsch (2003) recommended staff members receive training in adolescent peer dynamics in order to identify and address issues that arise. The authors, however, did not suggest what such training would include. Harkening back to the findings of this present study, leaders should be made aware of important details regarding not only their participants’ interpersonal dynamics but also the school and other community contexts where the girls interact. In the current study, relational issues that arose during other aspects of the school day affected the girls’ decisions to engage in program. As such, SBYD program leaders should be aware of the school and community climates which may influence the ways that participants may then relate to one another in program.

Practical steps that program leaders can take include emphasizing healthy relationships among the youth participants and learning more about their contexts. Healthy relationships can be facilitated through practices like sharing circles and developing a climate that encourages vulnerability (Bulanda &McCrea, 2013). By creating a sense of trust and connection through
regular and sustained practices, participants may become more comfortable with one another, participate more, and perceive a more positive climate in the program. These circles can also be places where adults learn more about the girls’ perceptions of their school, community, and program contexts. Leaders can also spend time themselves in these additional environments and form relationships with pivotal adults in those spaces. Jacobs, Lawson, Ivy, and Richards (2017) highlight working with parents through collective parental engagement to bridge the divides that often exist between programming, school, and community. I urge school-based program leaders to connect with teachers and administrators as key adults who can provide information about what happens within the school walls. However, adolescents should still be relied upon to speak on their personal experiences and their perceptions of climate and environment which may differ from adults (see Conderman, Walker, Neto, & Kackar-Cam, 2013; Mitchell, Bradshaw, & Leaf, 2010).

Additionally, Kelly and colleagues (2010) previously supported encouraging friend groups to participate together in order to increase Black girls’ physical activity participation. As was the case for Jasmine and Jordan, friends may increase participants’ likelihood of maintaining membership and attendance and may also lead to decreased relational issues (Strobel et al., 2008). The findings of the current study indicate that the presence of friend groups does not completely eliminate the potential for negative influences or problem behaviors. By mindfully considering participants’ fit with and connections to one another during the recruitment and selection process, issues between and among participants might be reduced. Specifically, when participants feel more tightly bonded to others and the program overall, they are more likely to participate and less likely to engage in the types of disruptive behavior that can derail the program session (Duerden & Gillard, 2011). Consideration of group composition extends to the
leadership team as well, given the influence of adults on the environment, and ultimately youth behavior. Programs, then, should be led by adults who are more likely to be actively engaged in the activities and, as a result, form bonds with the participants (Duerden & Gillard, 2011).

**School Leaders**

Within this study, the school environment not only influenced the girls’ engagement in physical activity but their perceptions and participation in the SBYD program. As such the implications for school leaders are related both to the structure of physical activity spaces and the climate within the school overall. Attending to both of these areas will influence how school leaders are able to engage Black and Hispanic girls in school-based physical activity, sustain their participation, and maintain more positive school climates.

A key observation in this study related to the structuring of the physical activity space. Gym time was designed such that boys were literally given the floor, the entire basketball court, while girls remained on the bleachers encouraged to braid each other’s hair. Additionally, as Sh’nana mentioned, they no longer had a structured physical education class, due to the absence of a permanent teacher. These unstructured gym periods were the only school-sponsored times for physical activity, yet no consideration was given as to how to engage the girls in the space. Here we see not only gendered assumptions surrounding expectations for physical activity participation but the added impact of teacher shortages in high poverty schools (García & Weiss, 2019). In order to fully engage Black and Hispanic girls, schools must be aware of, and be prepared to rectify the effects of, the barriers due to gendered and raced perceptions and structures created and enforced by adults.

School physical activity practices should be planned intentionally to ensure that girls are given adequate opportunities to participate, including the space and materials to do so. District
level policies should provide students access to quality physical activity instructors and curriculum designed to serve girls, especially in areas serving primarily Black and Hispanic students who are typically underserved (LaVoi, 2018). As a supplement or when this is not possible, recess activities should be designed in such a way that encourages girls’ involvement. When activities are informally organized by youth, girls are often excluded (Haudenhuyse, Theeboom, & Skille, 2014), but teachers can further exclude girls by the choices they make about the distribution of equipment and activity options (Fissette, 2013). Girls should be intentionally considered in the structuring of activity spaces and opportunities and explicitly asked for their input into programming options. Further, adults should be mindful to avoid steering girls towards stereotypical activities (LaVoi, 2018). Given the findings of this study, this would include addressing personal assumptions that girls are disinterested in sport and physical activity and opening dialogue with girls to determine their perceived barriers and desired activity options.

In addition to the necessary changes within the physical activity space, the findings of this study imply attention to the climate of the overall school environment. First, the normalization of physical aggression within the school should be addressed to improve student perceptions of their peer experiences within the school. When aggression is common, students tend to be more accepting of it from their peers and more aggressive themselves (Bierman, 2011). However, Brion-Meisels and Garnett (2016) point out that interventions often focus on individual bullying interactions rather than the importance of the greater contexts which shape those behaviors. Race, gender, and sociocultural context work together to shape youths’ perceptions and experiences of relational violence (Brion-Meisels & Garnett, 2016).
While much of the attention to bullying has considered power dynamics between individuals, Brion-Meisels and Garnett (2016) point to the need for schools to consider greater ecological factors that influence how students perceive and participate in relational violence. From the study at hand, schools need to consider the ways that gendered perceptions of behavior influence acceptance of aggression. The norms that students and staff accept surrounding such behaviors must be taken into account when building policies to improve student interactions. Once school officials understand these influences on behavior—such as socialized norms owing to gender, race, ethnicity, or culture—they can begin to develop policies to more effectively address these root causes.

At the classroom level, teachers can influence student views of and participation in aggressive behaviors through effective classroom management (Bierman, 2011). By setting clear expectations and showing support for prosocial behaviors, teachers can shape respectful climates free from physical aggression. When teachers actively discourage aggressive behaviors, the peer norms change in favor of more prosocial interactions (Bierman, 2011). Likewise, schoolwide norms can change based on the collective leadership and staff approach to aggressive behavior.

Assessments of school climate rest on “perceptions regarding social interactions, relationships, safety, values, and beliefs held by students, teachers, administrators, and staff within a school” (Rudasill, Snyder, Levinson, & Adelson, 2018, p. 46). Negative school climates are often embedded in greater contexts that provide barriers to school success, such as the perceptions throughout the district, as was evidenced during the Brachton school board meeting, and frequent turnover in leadership, as was the case in the current study. At the school level, low expectations for students, inconsistent discipline, and a culture of aggression at Evers likely led to a negative climate (Rudasill, et al., 2018). These cultures and ideologies may persist due the
systemic racism that sustains them and limits students’ access to resources such conflict resolution and socio-emotional skills training. At Evers, shifting the school climate in a positive direction would necessitate developing and maintaining consistent expectations for students that challenge them, help them to value academics, and allow them to feel supported and safe. Awareness of decreased expectations factored into students’ decisions to behave in ways that could be perceived as disruptive or off-task, such as hallway roaming. Teachers and other school staff members should be aware of the ways in which their policies and practices create or maintain negative peer climates among students. As was the case in this study, school leaders can implement SBYD programs to support greater efforts to provide additional resources to improve school climate.

By influencing the nature of peer interactions between students and providing clear expectations, SBYD programs can shift the climate of the school in the positive direction. SBYD programs and other school partners can be leveraged to help fill gaps in the schools’ offerings, such as opportunities for socioemotional skills training and physical activity and the provision of clear and consistent expectations. However, these programs should be used as a supplement to school wide efforts to change cultures and practices. As was the case in this study, negative aspects of school culture bled into and affected programming. Because these programs exist within the larger school context, the continuance of an unhealthy school climate will ultimately limit their ability to effect change schoolwide. Despite these limits, there is still the potential for school-based SBYD programs to positively affect those students involved.

For the girls in Strong Ties, the program provided a positive space within the school landscape where they could participate in physical activity and build positive relationships with other girls and adults. Extracurricular activities participation has been associated with higher
perceived levels of social support from adults and other students (Martinez, Coker, McMahon, Cohen, & Thapa, 2016). These measures were tied to perceptions of supportive and caring relationships. Students involved in these activities also reported higher levels of school connectedness. The authors suggest these effects may be due to the opportunities within these activities to build relationships and meaningful connections within the school (Martinez, et al., 2016). By providing SBYD programs, schools can provide students with more than just opportunities to engage in physical activity. With the supportive context and focus on positive relationships, SBYD programs may be a means to improve students’ perceptions of school climate and their connections with their peers.

**Future Directions**

Future studies of peer experiences in SBYD programs should employ longer observation periods in order to capture a greater diversity of interactions and any shifts in group dynamics which may influence the peer environment. Because this study was limited to eight weeks with program sessions lasting less than one hour, I was limited in what I observed. Researchers may also include systematic observation to supplement field notes. For example, researchers could use the factors of the model to create an observation checklist in order to code the range of interactions in the space. This would allow a more targeted look at individual interactions and would also add knowledge as to how this framework may be used in sport and physical activity settings, allowing for the coding of both mode and response. Potentially the use of video recording may help with the study of the dynamics of interactions. Other changes in methods suggested are the use of observer-participants, who will have the freedom to record notes during sessions, due to decreased involvement, while maintaining a familiarity with the participants. Additional topics to explore in future studies include the role of the adult-youth relationship in
shaping the environment and peer experiences within other spaces including competitive sport leagues.

Because the success of the SBYD program hinges on its leaders (Simpkins, 2015), this is another important area to explore in future research. If youth perceive similarities between themselves and adult leaders, this may influence the strength of relationships and thus the direction of outcomes from the program (Haudenhuyse, Theeboom, & Skille, 2014). Haudenhuyse and colleagues (2014) write that youth may see adults as similar to them due to “shared interests as well as shared cultural competence that stem from specific knowledge, language and lifestyle” (p. 146). These similarities cannot be learned and yet can have a substantial impact on the program’s effectiveness. The racial makeup and gender identities of the adult program leaders in the current study may have played a role in their relationships with the girls as the adults were more similar in racial and ethnic identities than the teachers in the school. As such, future studies should consider the impact of leaders’ identity on relationships with participants as well as the impact on the peer environment.

The SBYD setting is unique from traditional sport environments given the attention to youth development outcomes first and foremost (Perkins & Noam, 2007). In order to have a fuller understanding of the influence of peers on Black and Hispanic girls’ sport and physical activity behavior, researchers should study sport environments that include them. Doing so will provide more information about peer experiences in additional contexts and their influence on the full spectrum of girls’ participation opportunities and choices. The current lack of differentiated research denies the differences between Black and Hispanic girls and White girls’ peer environments. By not specifically studying Black and Hispanic girls, researchers have neglected the opportunity to explore their unique sociocultural contexts as influenced by their
race, ethnicity, and gender. Future researchers must consider these elements as important influences on the development and experience of the peer environment in these programs (Rubin et al., 2006).

Last, based on my experience throughout this project, it is critical to invite youth participants to offer feedback and suggestions on study design. Within the context of this study, interviews produced much richer data when the girls posed questions to each other. In these instances, they were able to draw upon their own understanding of their peer environment, which I was not privy to, and provide additional content for their peers to consider. Future researchers should consider honoring their participants’ knowledge, potentially by taking them on as peer interviewers or inviting them to significantly shape the design of the study. This may allow a more pointed lens as to what the most critical factors shaping the adolescents’ experiences are. I also recommend recruiting program leaders to pivotal roles in the design of the research study as allowing staff to speak to their observations widened the scope of the study.

**Significance of the Study**

By investigating peer experience directly through both observations and interviewing, this study helped fill a crucial gap in understanding Black and Hispanic girls’ physical activity choices. By specifically focusing on Black and Hispanic girls I was able to better understand the influence of their school and peer environments on their participation in the SBYD program. The use of an intersectional lens highlighted the ways in which race, ethnicity, gender, and age operated in these spaces to shape the girls’ participation in the program. This case study also provided more evidence about peer experiences in a natural setting, adding to those previous studies conducted in controlled laboratory conditions. In particular, I included the greater school context as a focus area. Within this and similar settings, institutional racism and gender-based
barriers were major factors that influenced the environment of the program. Factors such as school climate, peer norms, and gender and racially-based stereotypes should be considered when examining the experiences of Black and Hispanic girls. This level of analysis allowed for a better understanding of the structural and social environment which influenced the girls’ perceptions and behaviors. The findings, developed as a result of multiple data sources, provide criteria that can be used to improve the development and implementation of SBYD programming and partnerships with schools.
Reflection

Throughout this research project, in especially proposal development, I had to consider the limitations of my research design. Because this case study is one where I functioned as an insider and conducted participant observations, the major limitations were my personal identity and relationships to the site. I did all that I could to reduce those limitations by using multiple data sources and by consistently performing conceptual baggage checks and memoing to check my subjectivity throughout this process. Of course, limitations can never be fully eliminated. Regardless of the number of memos and checks I performed, I remained a Black woman and leader in the program. I remained deeply attached to this study. I recognized that these factors could continue to bias me. However, in all of my own research into the process of balancing these limitations, no authors mentioned the specific ways in which this might my research process.

First and foremost, my role in the program was a strength and positively influenced my research process:

Memo April 5, 2019: Because I am in the program, I have the ability to pay attention to how I as a practitioner make choices that actively influence the environment. I can bring to the light the ways in which I have chosen to manipulate aspects of the program along with Sade and the other leaders. I think that this is rich data because it is so context specific. I have the ability to note the other variables throughout the school. I am able to have conversations and observations that tell me about the greater school environment first hand. If I weren’t a leader, I couldn’t do that.

Because of the nature of this case study, it was important that I add access to multiple aspects of the school building and other potential influences on the girls’ behavior. My role not only meant
that I had access to all the various sources of data, but I myself was a source. I brought to this
project a wealth of knowledge about this program and my preexisting relationships meant that I
was able to more readily find others who could provide even more. This of course seemed like a
definite strength in the beginning.

As this project progressed, I spent more and more time in the building to ensure that I
was collecting as much data as possible. But the more I walked the halls, the more aware I
became of the nature of the school context that I had been oblivious to when I entered the school
merely as program leader:

Memo May 20, 2019: I went back to the room and noted to Sade that it was disturbing
that the teacher left a kindergartner behind. That multiple adults passed by kids in the hall
and did nothing. Yet I felt like it was a liability if I too did the same.

I was appalled by the number of students I saw roaming the hallway. Though I should have been
headed to observe the middle school classrooms, I was constantly stopping to usher a student
back to class. Wanting to understand the story behind the action, I continued talking to students
to better understand their rationale. One was in the hall because she felt dumb in class. Another
was there because there were students picking on him. Still other simply because no one cared to
look for them.

I grew increasingly outraged at the injustices that I became more aware of. I knew that if
these students were allowed to avoid class, then that would severely stunt their development. Yet
I also knew there were classrooms where students weren’t being challenged. I did my best to
work towards solutions. Because of my role in the program and thus the school, I felt that could
not ignore the problems I saw. The hallway became impassable as I couldn’t leave for there was
always a situation to deescalate. I remained frustrated. “Did no one else care? Didn’t a teacher or
administrator just walk past you? Why didn’t they try to talk to you first?” I would come back to
the programming room. I’d tell Sade what happened, why I was frustrated. She warned me:

Memo May 20, 2019: Sade said that I would eventually burn out if I kept up at this rate,
constantly engaging and trying to help.

I spent time listening to a student discuss very real problems. I was frozen in the hallway
working to get students back to class. I was becoming more aware of just how little students
were doing in the classroom. I was carrying all of that non-exhaustive list. I tried to add the
weight of yet another problem to my shoulders but collapsed. I entered the classroom to ask
permission for Heaven to participate in her interview. It was at that moment a student entered the
classroom and a fight began. Though I could see it happening before it really started, hands off
policies meant I could not do anything to prevent it:

Memo May 27, 2019: I was upset. I walked out of the room and Heaven was asking me
why I was shaking. I struggled to tell her that it was because I am not used to seeing such
things, and I wanted to be able to prevent it from happening but couldn’t. I was in a
position to help but could do nothing because my hands were tied by rules. I was shaking
because of the adrenaline that was still coursing through me that I had no idea what to do
with.

I felt powerless, despite how much I cared. My own hands were tied by polices that prevented
me from stopping harm from happening. Because of who I am, because of the relationships I
have in the building, it broke me that I couldn’t do more for the students. My frustration shifted
into dejection as it seemed like nothing I was doing was really improving things in the school.
Then just as just as Sade had predicted, it finally happened. That flame went out.
Memo May 27, 2019: I believe I have some notes written down and voice notes that I can go back and refer to. But I didn’t write these notes the day of because I needed to take a step back for my own mental health. I was overwhelmed by the issues in the school and my seemingly [sic] lack of a way to change things. I was in the school all week and seeing so many things that I broke down on Thursday after program and had to lay my soul bare to Sade and Yani. We didn’t even do a debriefing. But this is the reality.

Because of my attachment to the students in the program and the greater school, I was closely connected to their outcomes. I knew all too well that there were multiple factors working against them in the building. Though I tried, I couldn’t change things on my own for them. Knowing that was a lot to hold, too much to hold on to. For my own mental well-being, I reduced the number of extra program observations in the greater school environment. I chose to shield myself and focus on the girls of the program. This certainly influenced that range of data collected.

Is caring as a limitation to insider research? What about the perils of heartbreak? Of sorrow? Indignation? Those were all emotions I felt during my research encounters. In my case, those emotions forced me to alter my approach. Much of what I had previously assumed about the biases of my subjectivity were limited to my racial identity and the assumptions I held about the girls and the setting. I had not stopped to consider anything of the nature that I actually experienced. What then does that say about what I as a researcher should consider moving forward?

I knew that I would be biased due to my preexisting relationships. I knew that I would make assumptions based on my preexisting knowledge. I was not prepared for this research to be filled with so much emotion. Though “caring” was a limitation for me in my research study, it also helped me reignite my flame and continue on the journey. While my inability to remain
objective made this process much more difficult for me on a personal level, it drove me look
deeper into the underlying issues in the setting. Shifting my observation schedule meant that I
was there and present to allow for the programming room to be an additional interaction space. I
spoke with the girls more about their experiences in the school and learned more about what they
found important and interesting. I was able to reinvest in those relationships and focus on
learning from them rather than relying on my own observations.

In this case study, data were not inanimate numbers; they were not survey results. It was
people and their stories. It was their struggles, barriers, and ups and downs. Being in the school
allowed me access to more “data,” but that ultimately was not and could not be my goal:

Memo June 17, 2019: This is not a research project. This was a program centered on
relationships on which I conducted a research study. The events that happened in this
observation file are those that happened to real people, not subjects.

I have been thinking a bit about intersectionality and what that means in terms of the
girls’ lives, but it is absolutely vital that I recognize that it is important because of who I
am. I am a Black woman, who works with Black and Brown children. I can’t help but
feel emotionally involved because I personally identify with them. Walking in the halls
was supposed to be a means to getting more observations, but it became times where I
took interest in the children not in this study. The effort I made to get children to go to
class, to ask how they were doing, to make jokes, all of those things limited the amount
of time I could observe the girls at the center of this study. But I could not simply ignore
them. I could not simply just step over them. If I say that I care about the girls in the
program, how can I not care also about their siblings, their friends? Again, this was not
just a study. This was a time [where] I became more deeply embedded into a school and
growing in relationship with students there. I can’t begin to consider how much richer my data would have been if I simply had barged ahead and went on to their classrooms instead. I also can’t imagine how impoverished my own life would have been.

I return to my previous question: What then does that say about what I as a researcher should consider moving forward? Even if I am limited by own subjectivities, biases, and “caring,” I hope that at the end of the day I will always consider people.
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APPENDIX

This appendix is annotated. Notes for the reviewer are italicized and in blue.

Friends circle worksheet

“Friends Circle Worksheet (Sociogram): The following work sheet has been developed as a prompt for the adolescent participants to consider their peer relationships prior to the interview. It will then be used as a starting point within the individual interviews as I ask them to consider these relationships during the conversation. By asking about these friendships and how the relationships with other group members fit into the network, I hope to better understand how they perceive relationships with other members of the sport based youth development group and their perception of the greater peer climate. This helps to address the following research questions: “How do they perceive the relationships between and among group members? How do they perceive the group in the context of the greater peer environment of their school and other social spaces?”
Friends circle worksheet

Put your name at the top of the paper. Consider who you would put into these categories

Very close: friends you like to hang with, would help you if you need it, always there for you (best friends)
1. 
2. 
3. 

Somewhat close: People you hang out with/ in your friend group but not always there for you (just friends/associates/friends of friends)
1. 
2. 
3. 

Not very close: People you see often, but don’t feel close to, wouldn’t choose to hang out with (classmates, neighbors)
1. 
2. 
3.
In the inner most circle, write the names that go with the category
Smallest circle- very close
Middle circle- somewhat close
Biggest circle: not very close
Interview Guide for Adolescent Individual Initial Interviews

This interview guide has been designed for the initial adolescent individual interviews which are to take place after the start of the observation period and prior to the first focus group. This round of interviews is designed to explore the individual adolescent’s perceptions with the opportunity to speak at length about her personal experiences and relationships in the program. Specifically, the individual interview will address the “Friends Circle Worksheet” and the adolescent’s perceptions of her relationships in and outside the program with her peers and experiences in the program.

Welcome, thank you for agreeing to do this. We are going to be talking about the worksheet you filled out, your friends and peers, and what you think about Husky Power. Before we get started, I just want to let you know that I will not be sharing anything that you say with any school officials and hold what you say in confidence. I may bring up what you say in the focus group that we will have with the larger group, but it will not be attached to you or your name. Nothing you say will change your ability to be in the group. If you want to stop at any time or want to skip a question and not answer it, that is okay. Just let me know. The last thing is that I would like to record this interview so that I can refer back to what was said for my notes later. Is it okay for me to record this interview?

(if yes) If you at any time want to stop the recording or pause it and say something off the record, let me know.

(if no) Would you be okay if I take written notes as we speak?

Relationships
In this section we will address peer relationships. Because I am interested in the participants’ perceptions of their relationships within the program and the greater peer environment, this section is key. Additionally, literature (Brown, Bakken, Ameringer, & Mahon, 2008.) indicates the nature of the relationship that an adolescent has with her peers shapes their influence over her. By better understanding the nature and history of the relationships, I can better contextualize the interactions that may show up in the data.

1. To begin, I had you make a diagram (*Friend Circle Worksheet*) with people you are close and not so close with. Let’s start there. Tell me about your diagram.
   a. Who is in the inner circle?
      i. How long have you known them?
      ii. How did you meet?
      iii. Why did you put them in the middle?
   b. (Repeat prompts from “a” for other two circles)
   c. If applicable: Where would you put the other girls in the program on the page?
      i. Why?

2. Thinking about your closest friends, what activities do you do with them?
   a. When, where, how often

3. Is there anyone not on this sheet you would like to tell me about now?

4. What do those on the circle think about your participation in Husky Power? (*The status of the activity in the sight of one’s peers may shape participation patterns (Brown, 2013).* This will likely add data to better understand the participant’s own perceptions and participation patterns.)
   a. Do your closest friends know that you’re in Husky Power?
b. What have they said about it?

**Participation history**

*In this section, I want to address the influences on and the nature of their participation in the program. The following questions address their perceptions of the program and reasons for participating, which may evoke answers about the group overall and the influence of her peers in shaping her experiences.*

5. I want to transition now to ask about your participation in Husky Power. To start, why did you join Husky Power?
   a. What was the reason you started coming?
   b. What did you think would happen in the beginning?

6. Now that you have been coming for some time now, what do you think of it now?
   a. Why do you continue to keep coming?
      i. Possible prompts: what we do, who is there, when it happens, etc.

**Feedback on the program**

*Based on my experience with the program, these questions (likes, favorite activities, and feedback) have elicited responses regarding their perceptions of others in the group and interactions with them and how these have shaped their experiences in the group. It is likely that such questions may also generate similar responses here towards the research question, “How do they perceive individual interactions with peers in the group?”*

7. What are your favorite things about the program?
   a. Favorite activities, games

8. What is one thing you would change about the program?
9. Tell me about your participation in the program. There are times when you’re really into it and maybe times when you would rather sit out. Talk to me about what the difference is there.

b. What makes you really excited to participate?

c. What are some of the reasons you might choose to sit out?

Interactions and relationships

These questions help to provide substance to the observational data and allow participants to provide the background beyond what can be seen on the surface. Question 10 will help to clarify my assumptions about observed events. Question 11 will help me to elicit more examples of events that I as a participant-observer may have missed. The goal of this question is to explore more interactions the adolescent will have had with others in the group along with her perceptions of them and the connected relationship.

10. Observation based: I noticed (this incident/behavior). Can you tell me what you were feeling in that moment?

a. Explain the back story

   i. Who was involved? What was the previous relationship?

   ii. What did you feel/think?

11. Tell me about one of your strongest memories about the program, something that really stuck with you. It can be something good or something bad that you didn’t like.

a. What is the first thing that comes to mind?

b. Probe for details

   iii. Who/what/when

c. Why was it good/bad?
d. What was it a strong memory?

**Outside physical activity**

*With this question, I will be able to better understand physical activity choices and their influences in the program by comparing participation choices in other spaces. This question assists in answering the research question, “How do they perceive the group in the context of the greater peer environment of their school and other social spaces?” Research indicates that social support from peers increases the likelihood of participation in physical activity (Kelly, Parra-Medina, Pfeiffer, et al., 2010). Participants may speak to the environment of the program as shaping their decisions to be physically active and participate whereas different elements in other spaces lead to different participation patterns.*

12. The last thing I want to ask is, “Do you do any physical activity/exercise outside of the program?”

   a. If yes: what, with whom, when, why
   b. If no: why not
   c. Probe asking about PE

13. That was my last question. Is there anything else you would like to bring up that you thing I should know?

14. Thank you. I really appreciate your help in this. Thank you again for sharing your thoughts.
Focus Group 1 Guide- Adolescents

Welcome, thank you for agreeing to do this. We going to be talking about what you think about Husky Power and how things are going. Before we get started, I just want to let you know that in my interviews with the adult leaders, I may bring up a summary of what you all say here but will not connect it to any individual. I will not be sharing anything that you say with any school officials. I ask that all of you do the same and keep what is said here, here. But I can’t guarantee confidentiality because this is a group conversation with multiple people. Nothing you say will change your ability to be in the group. If you want to stop at any time or want to skip a question and not answer it, that is okay. Just let me know. The last thing is that I would like to record this interview so that I can refer back to what was said for my notes later. Is it okay for me to record this interview?

(If yes) If you at any time want to stop the recording or pause it and say something off the record, let me know.  
(If anyone says no) Would you be okay if I take written notes as we speak?

Opening, introdutory questions

*This opening serves two purposes. The first is to distinguish the voices of each speaker. The second is to generate conversation to allow participants time to ease into the interview process and become comfortable with the recorder.*

1. To start off, can everyone say her name quickly for the recording and tell me one or two words to describe how your day is going so far.
2. What were your classes like so far?

Perception of the group
As we get into it, I want to know what you think about the program, your participation, and how you all work together. I want to hear from all of you to hear what you think. Be mindful, just speak one at a time, so that the recording can register your voice. Also, same rules as always, be respectful and be mindful of language.

*These questions will steer the participants to begin thinking about the program. With the first question, I want to elicit memories of the group that will help me to better understand how they have perceived events. In previous experiences, asking about games they have enjoyed has led to answers about how the game is played and interactions that take place. This will help me to better understand individual interactions within the group, answering my research question. In questions 4 and 5 I will be asking directly how they perceive the group.*

3. To jump into it, let’s start talking about the program. What are some things that you have enjoyed?
   a. Probes: Were there any particular games or activities or moments?

4. How would you describe it someone who had never heard of it before?

5. How would you describe the group as a whole?
   a. What is the vibe like?
   b. How do you talk to one another?
   c. What is it like when playing the games?

**Influence on behavior**

*The first question is repeated from the individual interview as a way to allow those who may have not chosen to participate in the initial individual interview a chance to speak on their participation choices. Bringing this topic to the larger group also allows for a greater range of*
responses to the question but also an opportunity gauge how the group dynamic is affected by differing participation among members.

6. There are some times when you as individuals want to sit out or want to get really into the activity. What is about those days?
   a. Talk about when we have a lot of people involved. Why is that?
      i. What gets everyone active in the activity?
   b. Talk about when we have a lot of people sitting out. Why is that?

7. During program, you all interact with each other quite a bit. What I mean is that you do things with each other, talk, and play. Help me out and list all the different ways you interact with one another when you’re here. I am soliciting the range of interactions they have taken note of in the program. I also want to learn more about how they perceive these interactions and the ways in which they have shaped participants’ engagement in the program.
   a. Give me an example of what that looks like
   b. Why do you do that?
   c. You’ve talked before about how competitive games can get. Tell me more about that. What are you and other people doing then? What do you feel/think then?
   d. (Reminder: Try to talk more generally about what you would do and how you would feel.)

8. What are some other stories you have about the things we do in program?
   a. (Reminder: Try to talk more generally about what you would do and how you would feel.)

In the greater context
These questions help to address the perceptions of the group in within the greater context.

9. We’ve spent a great deal of time talking about what things are like in here. I’m curious what things are like when you’re in class or other parts of the school. Do you get a chance to talk and interact with each other outside of here?

10. How does that compare to the rest of the school day?
   a. How other students are?
   b. Teachers?
   c. What is different? What is the same?
   d. Why?
   e. What do you think about that?

11. All of you take PE class. What types of things do you do in PE?

12. What does your participation look like in PE?
   a. Is it the same as in group?
     ii. Why/why not?

Group

By addressing concerns participants may have with the group, some of the relational and interaction-based problems they have noticed. By encouraging them to work towards improving them, I can learn which aspects of intragroup relationships they perceive as important.

Subsequently, changes will be made based on the choices and will be addressed in the second focus group.
13. Having thought about all of that, I want you to now think about what we (you and the leaders) can do to make program better. What are some problems/concerns you would like to solve?
   
   b. Possible answers: participate more, how we treat each other, new games/activities… etc.
   
   c. Let’s make a list (allow them to write them all out)

14. Pick one of your concerns. Why is that important to you?

15. What are your ideas on how we can improve that?

16. That is the last question that I have. What is something else that you think I should know?

17. That is the end. Thank you all for participating. I will take your ideas on how to improve and the leaders and I will work on implementing them into the program.
Focus Group 2 Guide - Adolescents

Welcome, thank you for agreeing to do this. We are going to be talking about what you think about Husky Power and all that happens in it. I want to focus this session on getting your feedback on how things have been going and the changes we’ve made. Before we get started, I just want to remind you that in my interviews with the adult leaders, I may bring up a summary of what you all say here but will not connect it to any individual. I will not be sharing anything that you say with any school officials. I ask that all of you do the same and keep what is said here, here. But I can’t guarantee confidentiality because this is a group conversation with multiple people.

Nothing you say will change your ability to be in the group. If you want to stop at any time or want to skip a question and not answer it, that is okay. Just let me know. The last thing is that I would like to record this interview so that I can refer back to what was said for my notes later. Is it okay for me to record this interview?

(If yes) If you at any time want to stop the recording or pause it and say something off the record, let me know.

(If anyone says no) Would you be okay if I take written notes as we speak?

Opening questions

This opening serves two purposes. The first is to distinguish the voices of each speaker. The second is to generate conversation to allow participants time to ease into the interview process and become comfortable with the recorder.

1. To start off, can everyone say her name quickly for the recording.

2. Let’s just open with how your day has been so far. What has happened today?
   a. One good thing/one bad thing
3. What were your classes like so far?

Feedback on changes, follow-up from previous group

As we get into it, I want to know what you think about the program, your participation, and how you all work together. I want to hear from all of you to hear what you think. Be mindful, just speak one at a time, so that the recording can register your voice. Also, same rules as always, be respectful, be mindful of language.

*These questions are based on their responses at the end of focus group 1 and the resulting changes. Here I am gauging not only their perceptions of the changes but also assessing how they perceived interactions and their own participation behavior.*

4. Do you remember what suggestions you made last time?
   
   a. Provide a list to remind them

5. We made____ changes to the program based on your suggestions. I am curious about what you thought of those changes?
   
   a. Did they improve things?

   b. Make them worse?

   c. No change at all?

6. What are other changes you think should be made?
   
   a. Why

7. In the last focus group, we talked about times you are very engaged in the activities and times that you sit out. Tell me about your decisions now.
   
   a. When/how often are you engaged in the activities?

      i. If level increased, ask why

   b. When/how often are you sitting out?
i. If level changed, ask why

Participation influences

*These questions will help me collect data on how relationships and interactions with others in the group shape participation behavior.*

8. Has there ever been a time that someone else did something and then you got more into the activity?

9. Has there ever been a time someone else did something and you stopped playing because of it?

Perceptions of interactions

*These questions help to provide substance to the observational data and allow participants to provide the background beyond what can be seen on the surface. Question 10 will help to clarify my assumptions about observed events. Question 11 will help me to elicit more examples of events that I as a participant-observer may have missed. The goal of this question is to explore more interactions the adolescent will have had with others in the group along with her perceptions of them and the connected relationship.*

10. (Observation based) I noticed one day _________. Can you all tell me more about what happened then?

11. I want to hear some of your stories of things that happened in program. They can be good or bad.

   a. Was there a specific game, moment, event?

12. (Reminder: Try to talk more generally about what you would do and how you would feel.)
13. I’m going to list some examples of things that might happen and I would like to hear what would happen in that situation. The following scenarios are drawn from real experiences I have observed in the program. I use this question as an opportunity to better understand how they perceive these events and influence and are influenced by others’ behavior.

   a. One of the leaders starts to divide you into teams/asks you to pair up
   b. The other team scores/your team scores
   c. You see someone stop playing and sit out

   b. (Reminder: Try to talk more generally about what you would do and how you would feel.)

**Outside physical activity influences**

14. Now I want to ask about what you do outside of program. Do any of you exercise, play a sport, or do any other type of physical activity when you’re not here? I ask this question again, at this point likely weeks removed from the first asking at the initial interview. This allows me to assess again their participation in physical activity in other spaces, any changes that may occur in those choices, and how the greater context outside of the program is for them.

   c. If yes:
      i. What is it?
      ii. How long have you been doing it for?
      iii. What are the other people like there?
   d. If no:
      i. Why not?
ii. If you could think of one thing that would get you do something, what would it be?

15. That is the last question I have. What else do you want to say?
   
a. Something I forgot to ask

b. A thought you would like to return to

16. That is the end. If you think of anything else you want to add later on, let me know. Other than that, thank you for participating.
Focus Group 1 Guide- Adults

Welcome, thank you for agreeing to do this. We are going to be talking about what you think about Husky Power and what you have observed. Before we get started, I just want to let you know that I will keep what you say here confidential. I ask that all of you do the same and keep what is said here, here. Nothing you say will change your ability to work with the group. If you want to stop at any time or want to skip a question and not answer it, that is okay. Just let me know. The last thing is that I would like to record this interview so that I can refer back to what was said for my notes later. Is it okay for me to record this interview?

(if yes) If you at any time want to stop the recording or pause it and say something off the record, let me know.

(if anyone says no) Would you be okay if I take written notes as we speak?

Opening questions

This opening serves two purposes. The first is to distinguish the voices of each speaker. The second is to generate conversation to allow participants time to ease into the interview process become comfortable with the recorder.

1. To start off, can everyone say her name quickly for the recording.
2. Let’s just open with how your day has been so far. What has happened today?

Previous background

Because the adults’ previous experiences may color how they perceive observed adolescent behavior, I would like to know more about what they are.
3. To get into the questions, I would like to know how you came to be involved in this program?

4. What were your initial impressions/assumptions?
   a. Did you have any previous experience working with middle school girls?

Similar to the rationale for these questions for the adolescents, it is likely that by asking about likes and dislikes I will get responses surrounding interactions and relationships in the group. Better understanding the adults’ relationships with the girls will provide the context for their perceptions. These questions also help to begin establishing their observations of the peer environment

5. What do you like most about the program?

6. What do you like the least?

7. How would you describe your participation in the program?
   a. Possible answers: Active in the games, laid back, reserved

8. How would you describe your relationship with the girls?
   a. How do you interact with them?
   b. How do you think they perceive you?

9. What do you think about the girls? Specifically, if you were to describe the group as a whole to someone, what would you say?
   a. Are there any specific personalities that come to mind?

10. I had the girls develop sociograms, where they diagrammed their friend ties. Based on what you’ve seen in the program, how would you group them?
    a. Close friends, not so close, etc.
    b. Why would you make that choice?
Program observations

This section helps to add data as to the observed peer environment of the program.

11. Over the past few weeks we have talked some about what you have observed throughout the program. I would like to start there

   a. To start I observed…. What are your thoughts on that?

12. What have been some things you’ve observed?

Feedback

In this section, I can begin the process of addressing the girls concerns about the program and allow the adult participants to speak to what they have observed.

13. The last bit that I want to talk to you about is how the program is going. We talked about things you like and didn’t like. I asked a similar question of the girls. When I met with the girls, they voiced…… concern. What would you like to say about that?

   a. What are some things you think might help solve that?

14. These were some of the girls’ suggestions. …What do you think about them?

15. I would also like to make sure we address what some of your frustrations and concerns have been. What have been your concerns about the program?

   a. What are some things you would like to see done to address that?

16. That was my last question. Is there anything else you would like add?

17. If you think of something after this, let me know. Other than that, that is the end. Thank you for participating.
Focus Group 2 Guide- Adults

Welcome, thank you for agreeing to do this. We are going to be talking about what you think about Husky Power and what you have observed. Before we get started, I just want to let you know that I will keep what you say here confidential. I ask that all of you do the same and keep what is said here, here. Nothing you say will change your ability to work with the group. If you want to stop at any time or want to skip a question and not answer it, that is okay. Just let me know. The last thing is that I would like to record this interview so that I can refer back to what was said for my notes later. Is it okay for me to record this interview?

(If yes) If you at any time want to stop the recording or pause it and say something off the record, let me know.

(If anyone says no) Would you be okay if I take written notes as we speak?

Opening questions

This opening serves two purposes. The first is to distinguish the voices of each speaker. The second is to generate conversation to allow participants time to ease into the interview process become comfortable with the recorder.

1. To start off, can everyone say her name quickly for the recording.

2. Let’s just open with how your day has been so far. What has happened today?

Observations

This section helps to add data as to the observed peer environment of the program.

3. In the first focus group, we talked about how you would describe the group. Has anything changed in the past few weeks?
a. (Remind them of their answers)

4. Over the past few weeks we have talked some about what you have observed throughout the program. I would like to start there. One key moment that came up was ____ What are your thoughts on that?

5. What have been some other things you’ve observed?
   a. How would you describe the girls’ behavior in the group?
   b. How would you describe your own behavior/reactions?

6. There are times where the girls are really engaged in the activities and other times they sit out. What do you think the reasons for that are?
   a. What happens to make them get involved?
   b. What happens to have them sit out or refuse to come?

7. We talked last time about some of the concerns and issues you had and that the girls brought up. In response, we made ____ change. How has the program been since that change was made?
   a. Remind them of the concerns and changes
   b. Possible answers: things improved, nothing changed, got worse

8. What has been going well?

9. What further changes need to be made?

10. I want to hear some of your stories of things that happened in program. They can be good or bad.
    a. Was there a specific game, moment, event?

Personal physical activity
Adult’s previous experiences may color how they perceive observed adolescent behavior. Their own experiences with physical activity may shape their own behavior in the program and thus shift the environment for the adolescent participants.

11. Now I want to ask about what you do outside of program. Do any of you exercise, play a sport, or do any other type of physical activity when you’re not here?
   a. If yes:
      i. What is it?
      ii. How long have you been doing it for?
      iii. What are the other people like there?
   b. If no:
      i. Why not
      ii. If you could think of one thing that would get you do something, what would it be?
   c. What do you think the reasons the girls might give for why they do or don’t participate?

12. That was my last question. Is there anything else you would like add?

13. If you think of something after this, let me know. Other than that, that is the end. Thank you for participating.