‘The Beauty Walk, this ain’t my topic’: learning about critical inquiry with adolescent girls

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We examine what happened when a researcher worked with four African-American middle-school girls to critique the ways girls’ bodies are implicated in the schools’ hidden curriculum. We analyse an example of instruction around ‘The Beauty Walk’, a school-sponsored fundraiser. Drawing on critical and feminist pedagogies we ask: how did the researcher initiate and support engagement in the inquiry process? and how did the girls interact with the researcher? Through a micro-level analysis of verbal interactions, we develop a case study highlighting participation patterns. The researcher created both the topic agenda and the processes by which the girls would critically engage with the topic. She used a variety of strategies to scaffold the girls’ development of a verbal and written critique. Marked by points of engagement and resistance, the girls’ participation varied among the girls and across inquiry tasks. Even so, the girls were able to develop a written and verbal critique. We question our choice of using a researcher-selected topic for critical inquiry.

I mean school [is] supposed to teach you better stuff, but yet school judges people on what they look like on the outside, instead of the inside, and that doesn’t sound all that good.

Brandi, age 13

Brandi’s point about the purpose of schools is insightful. The school remains an institution of hope—a place where most people want children’s development to be enhanced. In fact, criticisms of schools are often fuelled by society’s intolerance for the discrepancies between its laudatory goals for schools and its perceptions of compromised realities in which children’s most basic needs are all too frequently unattended to. This discrepancy has been especially apparent in the way that schools have ignored the project of teaching students the processes of critique. This is a problem because such processes have potential for allowing youngsters to question debilitating life patterns and to invent, locate, and consider more equitable alternatives.

One topic particularly worthy of this type of critique is the body. We know that adolescent girls focus tremendous attention on the body, and that their concerns about their bodies frequently escalate out of control,

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transforming into angst and identity crises as well as psychological and physical illnesses (Brown and Gilligan 1992, Pipher 1994, Brumberg 1997). In explaining these circumstances, Brumberg (1997) noted that girls today view the shape and appearance of their bodies to be the primary expression of individual identity. Many spend inordinate amounts of time distracted from more productive activity by worry about what their bodies look like to themselves and to others (Brown and Gilligan 1992).

As one outcome of a collaborative research project with adolescent girls, Oliver and Lalik (2001) found that girls understand their bodies primarily as collateral for attracting and maintaining attention from boys and girls in their peer groups. They documented girls’ dissatisfaction with their bodies, accompanied by their active and strategic efforts to monitor, restrict, and control their bodies to achieve their social goals. Similarly, Best (2000) explained that girls view ‘attractiveness’ as a key factor in their ability to be popular in their social environment.

Such behavioural patterns among girls, while disturbing, are not surprising, given mass culture’s use of women’s bodies to maintain and perpetuate women’s oppression. According to Brumberg (1997: 214), ‘More than any other group in the population, girls and their bodies have borne the brunt of twentieth-century social change . . .’. In everyday life, the female body is objectified and demeaned in many different venues. For example, the female body is used as an enticement in efforts to market a wide array of products—from automobiles, to alcohol, to vacation weekends, to household appliances. Images of females have also been used to proliferate messages about the idealized female body (Bordo 1997), and to maintain the power balance in favour of Whites (hooks 1992, Collins 1998). As girls learn to participate in their cultures, they learn to accept these body-narratives, which are all too available to them (Oliver 1999). These narratives then shape the ways in which girls think and feel about themselves.

The ubiquity of these social assaults on the female body has promoted girls’ unconscious internalization of a sense of dissatisfaction, even shame, about their bodies. This internalization has encouraged girls to cultivate a perspective that one’s body is a thing separate from one’s self—a thing that often constrains one’s possibilities for success (Collins 1990, Pipher 1994, hooks 1995, Bordo 1997). There is evidence that negative social patterns persist, in part, because much cultural energy has gone into normalizing girls’ concerns and unhealthy behaviours. Society has adopted the idea that girls’ unhealthy bodily views and practices must be accepted as a ‘normal’ part of adolescence.

Schools, regrettably, remain one of the cultural spaces within which girls’ concerns, anxieties, and experiences around their bodies are generally dismissed by adults (Oliver 1999). Even more disturbing, schools are among those cultural sites where girls learn some of the debilitating cultural narratives of the female body as part of unplanned everyday interactions at school (Kirk 1998)—as part of the school’s ‘hidden curriculum’.

Even consciously planned curriculum has been shown to be oppressive to girls and others. Kenway and Modra (1992: 141) reported on the expansiveness of problems with school curriculum exposed by feminist critique:
Feminists’ ideology critique of all school subjects at all school levels has exposed this [planned] curriculum as heavily gender-inflected, either misrecognizing and misrepresenting, or neglecting and denying—but either way, undervaluing—the social contributions and cultural experiences of girls and women generally and working-class and minority racial and ethnic women in particular.

Given these problems, it is not surprising that curriculum transformation has become one of the social projects pursued by feminist educators as one means of creating a more equitable society (Weiler 1988, Gore 1992). Such work is not without its dangers, for analysis of alternative curricular efforts has shown that one can never be certain that an intentionally liberatory curriculum will have its intended effects (Lather 1991, Gore 1992). Nevertheless, curriculum remains an arena of hope for many feminists (Kenway and Modra 1992, hooks 1995, Collins 1998) and others, and the intersections of curriculum, teacher, and learner have been studied as a way of understanding meaning-making (Kenway and Modra 1992).

In this spirit we can ask if it is possible to work in schools to nurture and support girls in developing healthier and more ascendant views of their bodies. For example, can teachers use the tools of critical literacy to help girls both develop a sceptical perspective on dominant narratives of the female body and invent healthier possibilities for themselves. Oliver and Lalik (2001), for example, found that girls could develop a critical perspective on debilitating cultural narratives of the body when adults use girls’ views and experiences as foci for discussion and critique.

Curricula of this sort reflect a synthesis or integration of two mainstream content areas—physical education and language arts (Oliver and Lalik 2001). In physical education, the ‘social body’ has become a growing concern among researchers and teachers. Developing healthy perspectives and practices of the body is a sine qua non for staying well and active through life (Kirk and Tinning 1994, Armour 1999). Several theorists within physical education have shown interest in critical curriculum and pedagogy (Rovegno and Kirk 1995, Kirk 2000). For example, Penney and Chandler (2000: 73) contend that curriculum and pedagogical practices ought to nurture

the development of critically informed citizens who are committed to playing a part in establishing more equitable societies in which all individuals are valued; in which individual, social and cultural differences are celebrated as a richness of society; and in which knowledge is something to be collectively, collaboratively and creatively advanced, rather than pre-defined and ‘delivered’.

Language arts is also a field in which critical work, though muted, has been acknowledged as a useful approach for understanding and addressing persistent social inequities (Siegel and Fernandez 2000). Such interest has been evident particularly among theorists and researchers who view literacy as a life-changing activity of reading and writing the world (Freire 1985, Shannon 1990, Shor 1992, Greene 1995, hooks 1995). From this perspective, one is literate to the extent that one develops the knowledge, skill, and moral courage to change the world in the interests of equity and
justice. In Freire’s words (1985: 51; emphases in original), ‘As an event calling forth the critical reflection of both the learners and educators, the literacy process must relate speaking the word to transforming reality, and to man’s [sic] role in this transformation’.

While achieving this type of literacy is a formidable challenge for schools, there is evidence to suggest it is possible. For example, Fecho (1998) showed that when he promoted critical analysis in a literature classroom, adolescents learned to inquire into the ways that language sustained racial inequities. In doing so, students became more skilled in their use of Standard English, and they grew in their appreciation of the power and potential of Black English vernacular. This effort reflects the explanation of the critical media literacy described by Alvermann et al. (1999: 2):

Critical media literacy is about creating communities of active readers and writers who can be expected to exercise some degree of agency in deciding what textual positions they will assume or resist as they interact in complex social and cultural contexts.

Teachers’ efforts to support students’ use of critical analysis have become known as critical pedagogy (Fecho 1998). Shor (1992) explained critical pedagogy as a process that invites students to re-perceive and re-examine what they know and how they learned it, as well as question existing conditions. His work provides an example of the problems and possibilities for teachers who explore critical inquiry as part of school curricula. To enact this type of curriculum, Shor suggested that teachers and students work together to examine important issues and construct plans of action based on learning from their inquiries. In his own college-level classroom, he engages students in a process of desocialization whereby ‘knowledge is examined with the goal of gaining critical distance on what has been absorbed uncritically in school and everyday life’ (p. 119). He maintained that through such dialogue students develop a critical consciousness that ‘allows people to make broad connections between individual experience and social issues, between single problems and the larger social system’ (p. 127).

As part of initiating and sustaining classroom dialogue, Shor (1992) discussed various ways that teachers could work with students to identify topics for study. One such approach was through the use of topical themes—themes raised by teachers for students to explore. He suggested that when selecting topical themes, teachers apply three criteria: the theme is closely related to the main purpose of the project; it relies on idioms that students understand; and it is used primarily as a topic for inquiry by students rather than as a topic for explication by the teacher. According to Shor, ‘Critical teachers are willing to take the risk of introducing topical themes because student conversation and thought often do not include important issues in society’ (p. 56).

Several feminist scholars have questioned the intent of those advocating critical pedagogy, and have speculated about whose interests are being served under the masked term ‘critical pedagogy’ (Lather 1991, Ellsworth 1992, Luke and Gore 1992). In Lather’s words (1991: 15),
The suspicion of the intellectual who both objectifies and speaks for others inveighs us to develop a kind of self-reflexivity that will enable us to look closely at our own practice in terms of how we contribute to dominance in spite of our liberatory intentions.

Lather goes on to encourage those who work within feminist or critical pedagogical practices to ask, ‘How do our very efforts to liberate perpetuate the relations of dominance?’ (p. 16).

In thinking about how this question might play out in public school classrooms, Dillon and Moje (1998) emphasized the importance of analysing classroom talk, including talk among students and talk between teachers and students. They distinguished between talk about the classroom tasks (academic talk) and talk about students’ interests (social talk), noting both as necessary for learning. Of teacher’s talk, they explained that

[such] talk—or discourse—may help students learn concepts, but it may also serve to control students’ behaviours or practices. Assumptions about how the world works are embedded in these discourses; often, these assumptions are racist—we are often not even aware of what the assumptions are, but we live our lives according to them. (p. 219)

Similarly, Penney and Chandler (2000) argued that focusing on the details of teaching is the most significant process in curriculum development in physical education, but one that is often inadequately pursued.

For Gee (2000), the study of classroom interaction is important because it reveals how students are positioned with respect to the curriculum. He suggests that to understand a curriculum, researchers must examine the interactions among students and teachers through which students develop a perspective on who owns the curriculum. According to Gee, ownership of the curriculum, a feature needed if students are to connect what they are learning to the worlds they live in, is primarily built or lost at a micro-level, ‘the level of the moment-by-moment details of social interactions in school, not at the big macro-level of reforms, mission statements, and overt classism and racism’ (p. 9). From this perspective, if researchers hope to understand curriculum, as well as curricular processes, they must look below the surface, or as Gee said, they must examine those things that ‘go without saying’. Such analysis will help researchers better understand whose interests are being served, thus heeding Lather’s (1991) warning.

This paper reports an attempt to look below the surface to learn what happens when a teacher works to nurture girls’ critique of culturally dominant messages about girls’ bodies. We examine an example of instruction in which ‘The Beauty Walk’ was introduced as a topic for classroom inquiry. The Beauty Walk is a school-sponsored fundraiser that is similar to a beauty pageant, one in which girls are evaluated and judged based on others’ perceptions of their physical beauty.

To frame this inquiry, we pose two questions:

- how did the researcher initiate and support the girls’ engagement in the inquiry process?; and
- how did the girls interact with the researcher throughout the process?
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- how did the girls interact with the researcher throughout the process?
To avoid the one-dimensional approach to classroom study criticized by Gee and others, we examine each of these questions in terms of two curricula layers. As the first layer, we examined what tasks Kim, the teacher, used with the girls and her hopes for using them. At the next layer, we examined the classroom verbal interactions to see how the tasks were shaped through the micro-level, social processes that occurred between Kim and the girls.

Method

Setting/participants

This research project took place at Landview Middle School, an all-8th-grade school in the southern region of the USA. At the time of the project, 70% of the students identified as African Americans and 30% as European Americans.

Throughout the 1998–1999 academic year, Kim worked with two separate groups of four girls. She met with each group one day per week for 60 minutes, completing 26 sessions together between September and May. The girls met each Friday, ‘choice day’, during which no formal instruction occurred in physical education. Alternatives they might have chosen included activities such as completing missed work, playing basketball or volleyball, walking around the track, and sitting in the bleachers while socializing with their friends.

Throughout the year, the girls had the option of selecting from the other physical education ‘choice day’ alternatives. On one occasion, one girl chose an alternative activity rather than meet with the research group. On all other days throughout the 1998–1999 school year, unless a girl was absent (an infrequent circumstance), each girl attended the session with Kim.

The focal group consisted of four girls: Alexandria, Brandi, Destiny, and JayInn, all identifying as African Americans and all from working-class families. It seems important to note here that we (the authors) have biographies that differ in socially significant ways from those of the girls (Collins 1990). For example, neither of us identifies as African American (West 1994). Kim is a 34-year-old European American who was raised in an upper-middle-class family. She taught physical education in public schools and currently works as a university physical education teacher-educator and researcher. Rosary is also a university teacher-educator and researcher. She grew up as a member of a working-class immigrant family in the 1950s and was employed as a public school teacher before she began university work in literacy studies. Like Kim, Rosary identifies as a European American, although as a child members of her community often questioned her racial identity.

Given the differences between our experiences and those of the girls, our stance as researchers may be classified as that of ‘outsider’, and it necessarily limits what we can see and understand in our work with the girls (hooks 1995, Scheurich 2002). Given these differences in social and cultural positioning, we worked to keep the girls’ voices in the forefront of our interpretations and reporting. We did so, in part, to allow our readers, using
their own particular subjectivities, to interpret the girls' voices in their own ways (hooks 1995, Collins 1998).

Working with the girls

The data we analysed for this paper are part of a larger research project. Our purpose for the project was to learn ways in which concerned adults can help girls examine critically the connections between the ways girls' bodies are represented in culture and the ways girls experience their bodies. We believe that such work has potential for helping girls learn critical perspectives and skills that they can use for pursuing healthy lives in many contexts within and beyond school.

As primary researcher on this project, Kim worked directly with the girls. She began the sessions by inviting the girls to develop personal biographies, and she attempted to scaffold their completion of these biographies by means of questions about such matters as their home lives, their personal interests, and their school involvement. She then asked the girls to create personal maps of where and with whom they spent their time.

Next, Kim asked the girls to complete a series of magazine explorations and critiques. She asked them to cut out pictures that caught their attention, pictures that made them feel good and bad about their bodies, and pictures that sent messages to girls about their bodies (Oliver 2001).

While the girls were exploring magazines, Kim provided them with blank journals and asked them to use those journals to document the times they noticed their bodies. Kim encouraged the girls to write about what they were doing when they noticed their bodies, as well as what they were thinking and what they were feeling. She also asked them to write about things that made them feel good and bad about their bodies, and to document places where they received messages about their bodies. Kim read and responded to these journals every week.

As she continued working with the girls, Kim gave each girl three disposable cameras. With the first, she asked the girls to take pictures of things that made them feel good or bad about their bodies. With the second, she asked them to take pictures of things that sent messages to girls about their bodies. The third camera was used to photograph things that 'attracted the attention' of boys and girls. Both the journal-writing and photography began before the inquiry projects were initiated, and both continued in parallel to them.

The inquiry task described in this paper was the final segment of work with the girls. We wanted the girls to examine critically some aspect of their culture that implicated girls' bodies. To support the girls' inquiries, Kim planned to provide them with opportunities to examine their personal knowledge relevant to a focal topic. She also planned to help them create and distribute surveys based on questions they raised about the focal topic, and to analyse the survey data, identifying patterns and generating interpretations. Finally, she planned to help them create some representation of their learning from the inquiry. That is, she planned to help them to express their learning using a socially influential medium.
‘The Beauty Walk’

We organized our interpretations into a case study about ‘The Beauty Walk’ in an effort to examine the two research questions we had raised. To help the reader understand the case, we divided it into segments that reflected Kim’s plans for the progression of the inquiries. Thus we begin by describing how the topic of the Beauty Walk was selected. We move chronologically, describing how the inquiry was initiated, how Kim and the girls developed a critical analysis of the Beauty Walk, how Kim and the girls worked to complete the inquiry process, and how Kim and the girls worked to create a re-presentation of learning.

Selecting a topic for inquiry

Kim selected ‘The Beauty Walk’ as a topic for critical inquiry primarily because of its inclusion in the school’s official schedule of activities. The fact that a school would sponsor such a practice was abhorrent to her. As a researcher and educator concerned with adolescent girls’ health, Kim has little patience for activities that she believes are destructive to youngsters—girls and boys alike. She believed that once the girls in the research project critically analysed the practice, they would see its damaging consequences, and perhaps take action to discourage their community’s support for it.

Kim’s attitudes reflect Shor’s discussion of the tension between patience and impatience that exists in the processes of critical pedagogy. As Shor (1992: 25) puts it, ‘it takes impatience with the way things are to motivate people to make changes, but then it takes patience to study and to develop the projects through which constructive learning and change are made’. Kim was feeling rather ‘impatient’ about The Beauty Walk, and she believed that, given time, the girls would share her sentiment.

Before introducing the Beauty Walk as a topical theme, Kim learned that this school event had had a long-standing history in the community. Girls in this particular city had the ‘opportunity’ to participate in Beauty Walks beginning in kindergarten and continuing through 12th grade. In Kim’s view, the Beauty Walk exemplified an unquestioned, taken-for-granted, and potentially damaging school/community practice, and demonstrated the destructive influence of the hidden curriculum. As recommended by Shor (1992) and interpreted by Kim, introducing the Beauty Walk as a topical theme was an invitation to students to ‘step into territory ignored or covered uncritically by the standard curriculum and the mass media’ (p. 58).

Initiating an inquiry

Presenting a topic as a first step in the inquiry process

In January 1999, Alexandria, Brandi, Destiny, and Jaylinn walked through the classroom door, lively and energetic, talking and singing as they had on so many earlier occasions during their work with Kim. They exchanged
pleasantries with Kim as Alexandria asked, ‘So did you bring our cameras?’

The girls sat down at the table, organizing all their belongings. Kim responded briefly to Alexandria’s question before presenting the topic for inquiry.

Kim: I did. I’ll give them to you later . . . What we’re gonna do today . . . my last group is designing a survey for what attracts girls’ attention. They want to know what girls think attracts attention . . . What I’m going to ask our group to do is to come up with a survey on both boys’ and girls’ perceptions of the Beauty Walk. So first of all what I’d like to start with is, I need to know everything there is to know about this Beauty Walk. I hear it’s in February.

Brandi: I want to be in it . . . I think I’m going to be.
Kim: You’re going to be in it? So tell me a little bit about it.
Brandi: What do you want to know?
Kim: Everything. I mean, as much as you know. What is it? Why is it here? What do you have to do? Who’s in it? Who’s not? Who wins? Who judges? Everything there is possibly to know about this school activity.

Brandi: Um, let me think; I don’t know.
Kim: You’re gonna be in something [and] you don’t even know what it is!
Brandi: I want to be in it, but I’m afraid I’ll lose.
Kim: Why do you want to be in it?
Brandi: ‘Cause I like fun.
Kim: What do you do?
Brandi: I think you just model in your dress and stuff. I don’t even know if we have a talent part or anything, but [I] pretty much know it’s just modelling a dress.

Kim: What kind of dress?
Alexandria: A t-length [ankle-length] dress or a long dress.
Kim: How do people get chosen?
Brandi: In homeroom they nominate people . . . but you also can just get an application if you want to be in it.
Kim: Are you going to go? Do you have to pay to go?
Brandi: You have to pay $10 for something.
Alexandria: To be in it.
Kim: I hear it’s a fundraiser?
Alexandria: Yeah, I know it’s a fundraiser.
Kim: What are girls judged on . . . I mean, how does somebody win?
Alexandria: This ain’t my topic . . . I don’t really care about the Beauty Walk!

Kim was the clear initiator of the topic. She began the inquiry by telling the girls what the topic for study would be and explaining the first step in the process in terms of her needs, ‘I need to know everything there is to know
about the Beauty Walk'. She then asked a series of questions to which the
girls made only brief responses.

The girls’ initial response to Kim’s directive was unenthusiastic. Only
one girl responded to each of Kim’s questions, and only Brandi and
Alexandria spoke. This pattern was uncharacteristic for the group whose
members had often, during earlier sessions with Kim, provided multiple and
expansive answers to her questions. Brandi’s brief comments seemed tied to
her desires and fears about being in the Beauty Walk, whereas Alexandria
confirmed rumoured information brought up by either Kim or Brandi.
Alexandria’s proclamation, ‘This ain’t my topic’, highlighted the girls’ initial
resistance to the assignment.

Developing a critical analysis of the Beauty Walk

Frustrated with the girls’ lack of enthusiasm, yet unwilling to give up, Kim
resumed her interrogation of the topic. Turning to Alexandria, she asked,
‘Alexandria, you don’t care about the Beauty Walk? Why? It doesn’t matter
to you? Do you think it’s a good thing for schools to have?’

Brandi responded, ‘Not really . . . ‘Cause girls could lose. They might
not feel that they’re as pretty [or they might feel that] they are ugly or
something . . . They should have like an [event], with your regular clothes
and like your personality.’

Inserting our views

Kim continued to raise questions about the Beauty Walk, revealing several of
her own complaints about the practice. ‘So rather than being judged on how
you look, have them judge you on who you are and what you can do . . . I
mean, a t-length or long dress. That sounds kind of fancy to me. Do people
spend a lot of money for this thing?’

Alexandria responded, ‘It depends . . . A lot of people that were gonna
be in it, when they found out that they had to buy a new dress they were like,
“No, I’m not going to be in it” . . . Most of those girls weren’t all that pretty
anyway.’

Kim continued revealing her own interest in the topic, ‘I’m just trying to
understand why schools would have activities that put girls in the position of
being judged on the way they look. I don’t understand that.’ Alexandria
rather frankly asserted her objection; ‘I have no idea . . . I told you, this ain’t
my topic!’

Ignoring Alexandria, Kim turned to Destiny, ‘Destiny, what do you
know about it? Do you like the idea of it?’ Destiny rejected Kim’s question
by stating flatly, ‘I don’t care!’

Undaunted by the girls’ resistance, Kim moved on to the next activity in
the inquiry process, that of designing a survey. ‘So if we wanted to know
what [other] girls thought about this [topic], what types of things would we
need to ask?’ Alexandria declined to cooperate in the process, saying merely,
‘I don’t know’.
At this point Kim acknowledged the uncharacteristic quality of the response from the girls. 'This is the first time I have sat here, in this room, with the four of you and it's been so quiet'. Alexandria reiterated her position. 'I told you, [the] Beauty Walk isn't my subject'. Kim dismissed the response by projecting on the girls her own desire to survey other students. 'It doesn't have to be your subject. We want to know what other people think about it.'

Brandi offered an explanation of her reluctance, expressing a generalized sense of unfamiliarity with the topic. 'I don't know what I think about it; I don't know what other people think about it. I don't know what anyone thinks about it.'

In analysing these data, we noticed that Kim was not willing to let the girls' resistance to inquiring about the Beauty Walk override her desire to have them examine it critically. In her judgement, it was more reasonable to persist in order to promote interest in the topic than to abandon inquiry or invite learners to offer alternative topics for inquiry.

**Reporting what 'other girls' think**

Besides directly expressing her own concerns about the Beauty Walk, Kim tried a variety of other strategies to engage the girls in critical inquiry. One strategy she used was importing critique from 'other girls' into the conversation. That is, she presented information about the views of girls who were participating in a second research group—one that was being conducted during the same school year with girls who were known to the girls in this group.

Well, let me give you some of what the other class thinks. Maybe that'll help you think about it. Do you know Monique? [They nod their heads affirmatively.] She didn't want to be in it because she thinks that only White girls win, so it's a waste of time. Kristi thinks that the people who win, their parents are the most active in the PTA [Parent–Teacher Association]. She said for the last three years the people who have won—the moms or dads have been the PTA president or vice-president. They said it cost an awful lot of money to be in it. She says you have to pay a $10 dollar entry fee; you need a formal dress, which they figured was about $300. Your nails need to be done; your hair needs to be done. They even talked about buying jewellery, expensive jewellery. Make-up. People go on a diet . . . They went on and on and on.

Kim's report stimulated discussion for two of the girls. Both Alexandria and Brandi began questioning the other girls' statements. Brandi asked, 'What is the point of jewellery?'

Kim restated her interest in the topic and inserted a comparison with boys:

I don't know; that's what I was asking. I'm just trying to figure out what this whole thing is about and why a school has this type of an event. They don't do it to the boys. They don't put the boys up there and parade them around and judge them on how they look. Why do they do it to the girls?

Alexandria offered a desire followed by a rationale linking the Beauty Walk to femininity and beauty. 'I wish they did, but they don't. I guess
because girls are supposed to be feminine and pretty or something.’ Kim evaluated the comment, treating it as a correct response. ‘Right, but what does that say about girls?’

At this point, the girls’ responses became a bit more enlivened. Alexandria began to explain ‘It’s kind of like . . .’, and Brandi jumped in, ‘stereotyping’. Alexandria continued, ‘Yeah, like, yeah’.

Kim asked, ‘What is it stereotyping girls as?’

Alexandria continued, ‘Like, all girls are supposed to be like all prissy and stuff’.

After Kim used critique from the girls in the other research group, both Alexandria and Brandi offered bits of a theory about the Beauty Walk by relating an expectation for girls.

The strategy of importing what ‘other girls’ had to say was one that Kim used often to entice the girls into conversation about the Beauty Walk. This was the first time any of the girls showed clear interest in pursuing the topic. Both Alexandria and Brandi responded enthusiastically. While Jaylin and Destiny remained taciturn during this exchange, this had been characteristic of their behaviour to this point in the study.

**Eliciting the negatives**

Another strategy Kim used to engage the girls in a critical analysis of the Beauty Walk was to evoke bits and pieces of critique from the girls themselves. For example, she asked them to list everything wrong with the Beauty Walk. ‘Let’s list everything that is wrong about this whole activity. What are all the bad things about it?’ Alexandria and Brandi became engaged in this question.

Brandi began the list. ‘It’s not helping anyone.’

Alexandria added, ‘It’s only helping one person out of all those people . . . Out of all those people that are gonna be in it, only one person is going to win.’

Kim attempted to involve Destiny. ‘Destiny, what do you think’s wrong with it?’

Destiny offered an explanation. ‘It’s stereotyping people.’

Brandi elaborated, offering criteria for beauty she believed were in play, ‘Oh, they . . . judge on like size of their bodies . . . hair length, all these hair and your colour and all that . . . I know a lot of light-skinned girls go.’

Alexandria elaborated further, specifying criteria for beauty reflected in popular music. ‘You know how in songs, mostly Black people’s songs, you always hear how they sing like . . . They don’t say three girls with short hair or anything. And they don’t say dark skinny girls with short hair. They say like light skinny girls with long hair.’

Brandi questioned the criterion of body size and offered an alternative evaluation of beauty. ‘And then, on the size of their bodies. Like sometimes they pick the skinny girls over the big girls. Well, some girls, like, some girls aren’t big but some girls aren’t small and they look better than some of the skinny girls.’
Alexandria elaborated, ‘If it’s a man judge, probably they [judge] on chest area or buttocks’.

Kim linked the girls’ comments to the concept of stereotyping and concluded: ‘So that means we have assumptions. We have stereotypes about beauty, then. What are our stereotypes about beauty according to what people will be judged on?’

The girls listed a series of qualities that they thought contributed to ‘stereotypes’ of beauty: ‘big breasts’, ‘small waist’, ‘long hair’, ‘light skin’ [if Black], ‘tan’ [if White], ‘eye colour’, and ‘facial features’. Brandi offered a judgement of the process as they had described it. ‘It’s just not right . . . It’s backwards.’

At this point, Kim shared her idea of what needed to be done in response to what the girls were explaining about problems with the Beauty Walk. ‘I think we need, as a group, to write a letter to the editor of the newspaper.’

Unlike her earlier more reluctant responses, Alexandria responded enthusiastically to Kim’s suggestion. ‘Yeah, we do. That’d be cool!’

Kim specified a manner by which the letter would be prepared. ‘But we’re going to do it [the letter] based on what people actually think.’

At this point Brandi shared a decision. ‘I think I’m not gonna turn my application [for entering the Beauty Walk] back in.’

**Kim:** You can be in it.

**Brandi:** We haven’t pointed out any good points in it.

**Kim:** Well we’re going to do that next.

**Alexandria:** I can’t think of nothing.

**Kim:** What are the good things?

**Brandi:** OK, it helps some girls, like if they get 1st, 2nd, or 3rd place it might help too.

**Alexandria:** It helps some girls.

**Brandi:** And you get to see how you look in all this . . . you get to see another side of you.

**Kim:** How you look dressed up.

Alexandria and Brandi: Yeah.

**Brandi:** Like go to church and stuff, but they’re not really trying to get all fancy to go to church.

**Kim:** OK, so there is an aspect of fun in it.

**Alexandria:** Like it shows you the side of you [that] you didn’t know you had.

The opportunity to focus on difficulties with the Beauty Walk seemed to inspire Alexandria’s interest in writing a letter. It helped Brandi to question her personal plans about participating in the Beauty Walk. These responses are somewhat surprising in the light of the girls’ earlier reluctance to engage with the topic. As part of these interactions, Kim re-presented several comments in terms of concepts related to critique, such as assumptions and stereotypes. She also took advantage of the girls’ increased participation by proposing a way for the girls to express their concerns—by writing a letter.
to the editor of a local newspaper. Finally, Kim supported Brandi’s observation that they had not pointed out any positive aspects of the Beauty Walk by asking the girls to identify some of them.

Redirecting attention and questioning further

Kim also attempted to engage the girls in critical analysis by redirecting their attention to their earlier statements and by asking questions that elicited judgements and a rationale for those judgements. For example, when the girls were pointing out different reasons why the Beauty Walk was ‘bad’, Kim often redirected them to particular points they had made previously in order to help them elaborate. She would then walk them through an elaboration with a series of questions.

Kim: Alright, you had also said it makes some girls feel bad if they lose, and that you can only have one winner.

Brandi: Yeah. You can lose self-confidence.

Kim: OK, so you lose self-confidence. But let’s think about this. How many people can be in it?

Alexandria: I have no idea.

Kim: You have one [girl] from every homeroom class. How many homerooms are there? [Make] a guess.

Brandi: We have a homeroom representative, but other kids can still get an application to be in it.

Kim: Now, so really there could be a lot of girls in here, and there’s only one winner. And so we have a lot of girls who feel really bad about themselves because they don’t win. Why should schools have activities like that?

Alexandria: I mean, like schools, the school probably says that the Beauty Walk is to build up people’s self-esteem, but if there is only one winner only one person’s esteem is gonna go up.

Kim: You got it. And so what’s wrong with this activity?

Alexandria: It’s backwards.

Using redirection and follow-up questioning, Kim was able to support the girls in analysing several aspects of the Beauty Walk more extensively than they had. She did this by repeating selected statements they had made, asking them to elaborate on their meaning, directing their attention to aspects of the situation that might inspire further critique, summarizing and elaborating their analysis, and inviting judgement. In these efforts Kim relied heavily on her own personal and professional judgement that the Beauty Walk was antithetical to girls’ welfare.

Trusting the girls’ playfulness

Although the mood of these conversations was sometimes rather intense, the girls frequently engaged in playful activities. When this happened, Kim
typically supported the shift. For example, when claiming that the Beauty Walk was ‘backwards’, Alexandria and Brandi began singing army songs. Kim looked to Jaylnn and Destiny and said laughingly, ‘Where did we find these two?’ Everyone, including Kim, burst into laughter, and then the singing continued.

At these informal moments, Kim and the girls would often share important information. For example, in the preceding example, Brandi stopped her singing to ask Kim, ‘What made you pick us [to be in the research project]?’ When Kim told her that part of the reason she selected them was because they were ‘chatty’, Brandi agreed enthusiastically, ‘I can talk a lot!’

Alexandria agreed, reasserting her disinterest in the Beauty Walk while revealing a topic she would prefer to examine, ‘I can, too, when it’s my subject; like boys, that’s my subject right there’.

As if to confirm a more general interest in the topic of boys, Alexandria’s comment evoked a general discussion about ‘who was going with whom’. In spite of Kim’s support for the girls’ playfulness, she did not use their enthusiasm for the topic of boys as a cue to redirect the inquiry. Rather, after listening to the girls talk about boys for several minutes, Kim used their interest in boys to redirect their attention to the Beauty Walk inquiry. Specifically, she asked them to consider what questions they wished to ask the boys when they surveyed them about the Beauty Walk. ‘Alright going back . . . Let’s make up all the questions you would want to ask boys about what they think about this [the Beauty Walk], since we’re talking about boys.’

With attention to questions for boys in the foreground, Alexandria and Brandi expressed increased interest in designing the survey. Alexandria immediately proposed a question, ‘Who is in the Beauty Walk that you want to see? I want to know who they [i.e. boys] want to see . . . You could put . . . Who do you want to see in the Beauty Walk?’, and . . . yeah, like, ‘What kind of girls . . .?’

Designing the survey

Developing ‘critical’ questions

Besides inviting the girls to participate in a critique of the Beauty Walk, Kim involved the girls in designing a survey to learn about other students’ perceptions of this school event. Rather than taking a neutral position on the Beauty Walk, Kim worked with the girls to construct survey questions that would evoke critique from the respondents. Typically, Kim would ask the girls to make judgements about certain aspects of the Beauty Walk, and use those judgements to draft questions. She hoped that such questions would provide survey respondents with opportunities to explore some of their taken-for-granted assumptions about the Beauty Walk.

It was often an effort for the girls to articulate the judgements that were the bases for the survey questions. Sometimes Kim herself provided some of the language for the assumptions. For example, Kim encouraged the girls to say that the Beauty Walk discriminated against girls.
Kim: What's wrong with the Beauty Walk... Is it fair?
Brandi: No, it is, uh [pause], what's the word [pause], um, not disgrace, it's, uh. I don't know.
Kim: Discriminate?
Brandi: Yeah!

The girls and Kim spent a good deal of time trying to draft questions based on the assumptions. For example, they worked at length on a question about how the Beauty Walk discriminated against girls. Although Brandi preferred using the word 'discriminate', neither she nor Alexandria thought that student respondents would know what that word meant. They played with the idea of using the word 'unfair', but were unable to come to a conclusion. During another session, the girls, with Kim's encouragement, returned to their effort to construct a question about discrimination.

Kim: I think we need to think about rewording this question because it is a good one. I'm just not sure we have it worded in a way we want. It says, 'Describe how the Beauty Walk discriminates against girls', and then in parenthesis after discriminates I put 'is unfair'. Do you think that's worded good?

Alexandria: Nope.

Kim: OK, how can we? Because I think the information here is why is this not a fair contest for all girls. Is that kind of what we're getting at... What do you think? Do you think it is a fair contest? Let's start with what you think. Do you think it is a fair contest or do you think it discriminates against people?

Brandi: I don't know; I think it's kind of both.

Kim: Describe how it's not fair.

Brandi: Help me out, Jaylin.

Kim: Let's think of all the possible ways that this is not fair.

Brandi: Self-esteem. [It] might lower some girls' self-esteem. And some girls might wanna be in the Beauty Walk, but they might not have the money to purchase their gowns and have their hair done and all that.

Kim: So in order to really be in this, while they may say anybody can be in it, it costs a lot of money; so it discriminates against people that don't have money they can spend on frivolous stuff.

Brandi: Of course!

Kim: So you think that's a good way to word it? To describe how the Beauty Walk is unfair to girls?

Brandi: Yes.

As they began constructing the survey, Kim focused the girls' attention on what was wrong with the Beauty Walk, as a basis for designing the survey questions. She encouraged them to return to a consideration of inequities of the Beauty Walk until they expressed satisfaction with their questions. Collaborating with Kim, the girls struggled over word selection for the survey questions. Both Kim and the girls threw out their ideas and discussed
their implications. They paid particular attention to word use and explained their concerns until they could find a word that suited everyone. For her part, Kim encouraged the girls to return to the questions several times and consider the assumptions embedded within them.

The girls and Kim spent much time considering how respondents might interpret various versions of their questions. The question about race and racism was particularly important to Brandi. When Kim changed the wording of Jaylinn’s question about whether or not the Beauty Walk was racist to ‘Describe how the Beauty Walk might be racist’, Brandi voiced her objection:

*Brandi:* Don’t use ‘racist’.
*Kim:* I thought you said use the word ‘racist’.
*Brandi:* I said don’t.
*Kim:* Tell me what I’m to use.
*Brandi:* I said if we’re going to use the word ‘racist’, use ‘racism’.
*Kim:* Why is that?
*Brandi:* We might be stereotyping some people.
*Kim:* Good idea!
*Brandi:* And we don’t want to offend any people... I think we should [have a question], but we have to find a way to word it so people don’t get offended.

*Kim:* Alright. That’s going to be a tough one. How do we do it? Think about what would offend you in that kind of a question... So we can think of all the possible ways it could offend people.

Rather than dismissing Brandi’s objection, Kim explored it by asking for an explanation and inviting Brandi to advise her about the wording of the question. Finally, Kim suggested using prediction as a strategy that they might use to avoid the problem of offending people that Brandi had explained.

The girls and Kim devoted almost an entire 60-minute session to predicting the possible ways in which people might be offended by a question on racism. They began by exploring how they themselves might be offended, and then they worked to imagine how others might be offended. It was only after they had finished this process that they were able to reach agreement about how they wanted to word the question. Kim made several suggestions that were rejected. Finally, the group reached agreement after the girls revised one of Kim’s suggestions. ‘What about, “Describe what race has to do with the Beauty Walk”?’ Do you think that would be a good question?’ Brandi agreed, ‘Yes, it would be a great question!’ Alexandria offered a substitution, ‘might have to do with?’ Brandi continued, ‘Yeah, cause some might not think it [race] has anything to do with the Beauty Walk’. The girls all agreed that the question should read, ‘Describe what race might have to do with the Beauty Walk’.

The girls’ efforts to make sure that the questions were worded so that people would not be offended, and the time that they demanded be spent figuring out the ‘right’ wording, suggested to us that they were committed to this aspect of the project. Kim worked closely with them, offering numerous
suggestions, asking their opinions, and incorporating their suggestions into the proposed questions. The girls also offered suggestions that Kim and the girls considered in similar fashion.

In its completed form the survey consisted of 12 items.

1. Were you in the Beauty Walk?
2. Did you want to be in the Beauty Walk?
3. Do you think the Beauty Walk is a popularity contest?
4. Why does Landview Middle School have a Beauty Walk?
5. What do girls who are in the Beauty Walk have to do to prepare for the ‘Walk’?
6. How do you think the Beauty Walk makes girls feel about themselves?
7. How do you think people act towards girls who participate in the Beauty Walk?
8. Describe how the Beauty Walk might be unfair to girls
9. Imagine you won the Beauty Walk. Describe how it would make you feel about yourself.
10. Imagine you were in the Beauty Walk and you did not win. Describe how it would make you feel about yourself
11. Describe what race might have to do with the Beauty Walk.
12. Why do they have a Beauty Walk for girls and not for boys?

**Learning to interview: ‘Being news reporters’**

After the girls had finalized the survey questions, Kim directed them to learn about conducting interviews. Kim decided that before the girls actually conducted interviews with others outside the group, they needed to practise interviewing skills. Thus she asked them to interview each other. Alexandria said, ‘Oh, we get to be news reporters’.

Kim agreed, and continued by asking each girl to fill out a survey so that the person who practised interviewing her could use her completed survey as a basis for eliciting further explanation. The girls were enlivened as they completed the survey. They combined academic talk (talk about the survey) with personal talk (talk about their lives). Kim chimed in with the rhythms the girls established for this work. In this case, as in many others, Kim’s comments and humour flowed in the directions set by the girls, and often included some combination of social and academic talk.

Once the girls completed their surveys, Kim explained that they needed to ask people to elaborate their answers. She instructed them to take some general notes on what was being said during an interview so that they could remember the details of a person’s comments. Besides explaining how to interview, Kim modelled the process by interviewing Destiny.

After modelling, Kim asked the girls to practise by interviewing each other. Brandi started by saying to Destiny, ‘Good evening, Ma’am, how are you? My name is Brandi Patton and I’m going to be interviewing today about the Beauty Walk.’
In turn, Destiny enthusiastically assumed the role of interviewer as she began interviewing Brandi:

Destiny: [reading from Brandi’s survey] Why did you want to be in the Beauty Walk?
Brandi: Because I thought [pause] it would probably make me more popular. But then I’d have to come in [sic] here and ya’ll started to [pause], you know, really give me a lot of good reasons. I thought about it and it’s, like, changed my mind.
Jaylnn: [jumping into the conversation] How do you think a girl should be popular?
Brandi: I should be popular for myself . . . You need to write this stuff down, Destiny.
Destiny: I’m writing, I’m writing.
Jaylnn: [reading from Alexandria’s survey and questioning Alexandria] How do you think people act toward the winner?
Alexandria: They treat them with a little bit more respect. I don’t know why, but they do.
Jaylnn: Why do you think that the Beauty Walk is unfair to some girls?
Alexandria: I don’t think it’s unfair. But then again I do think that it’s kinda unfair. I think it’s unfair that girls have to be paraded; well, they don’t have to because they choose to be in it. But anyway, that girls are paraded around on stage and boys just sit and watch while the girls . . . If the boys get to look at the girls, then the girls should be able to look at the boys.
Jaylnn: Why do you think that ‘booty’ walks are mostly for girls and not boys?
Alexandria: Because beauty is a feminine word and boys think [pause] . . . ‘I ain’t being in no Beauty Walk’ . . . ‘Beauty Walk’ sounds feminine and boys think that they suppose to be masculine, because they’re men—well, boys.
Alexandria: [speaking to Brandi] Why do girls got to walk around on stage all dressed up and the boys don’t?
Brandi: Like, double standards or something.
Kim: What do you mean, ‘double standards’?
Brandi: Like for girls [pause], like parents have different standards, like [pause], I mean, they might not but, like, it seems like it ‘cause they think when you a girl you smart and all that. You think of a boy, you think. dumb, stink, lazy, or whatever. It’s not necessarily a girl thing, but they think girls are supposed to be better than boys, kind of.

All four girls seemed to enjoy this aspect of the inquiry project. Even Destiny, who had spoken very little all year, was verbally active. As they practised interviewing each other, they began articulating some of the theories of the Beauty Walk Kim had been developing with them. For example, Alexandria explained that ‘it is unfair that girls are . . . paraded around on stage and boys just sit and watch’. Often the girls developed
insights that went beyond Kim’s expressed views. For example, Brandi explained that the Beauty Walk could make people more ‘popular’, and that it reinforced ‘double standards’ for girls. Alexandria explained that the winner will earn ‘more respect’ from others, and that beauty is a ‘feminine’ quality. At times, the girls resisted totalizing interpretations of the Beauty Walk, such as when Alexandria explained her equivocal interpretation of the Beauty Walk, ‘I don’t think it’s unfair. But then again I do think that it’s kinda unfair.’

Attending the Beauty Walk

As part of the process, Kim invited the girls to attend the Beauty Walk, and she offered to accompany them, to pay for their tickets, and to provide transportation. Two of the girls, Alexandria and Brandi, accepted her invitation. The three met outside the school on the evening of the event and went backstage to briefly observe the contestants prior to the programme. During the event, the three sat in the audience and discussed the participants. The girls evaluated the appearance of the contestants, frequently noting hair and dress styles. For example, ‘Oh, look at how cute Kisha’s dress is’. ‘Who’s Kisha?’, asked Kim. Brandi replied, ‘She is the Black girl with the long hair in the back row, with the long peach dress’.

When the winner was announced, Alexandria and Brandi explained to Kim that the girl was the daughter of the PTA president for their school. They also commented on how many of the students in the audience left without acknowledging the winner or applauding the event.

Surveying and interviewing girls

In the week following the Beauty Walk, Kim arranged to survey the physical education class that Alexandria, Brandi, Destiny, and Jaylnn attended. Kim provided the class with oral instructions, asking them if they would fill out the surveys on the Beauty Walk. The girls helped distribute the surveys and monitor their completion. At the following session, nine of the girls from the physical education class who had signed took part in interviews with the research group. Each student researcher interviewed two peers. Kim interviewed one of the Beauty Walk contestants, Kemya. When the girls finished their interviews, their peers returned to their class, and they joined Kim and Kemya to participate in the conversation.

Brandi: [says to Kemya] She’s asking you questions in general?
Kemya: Like basically how I feel about it [the Beauty Walk].
Brandi: How do you feel about it?
Kemya: I don’t think it’s right. I don’t think it’s right.
Brandi: Why?
Kemya: You just like her [Kim].

Brandi’s use of the question, ‘Why?’, suggests that she was able to use one of the strategies of critique that Kim frequently used with the girls.
Interpreting surveys and interviews

As Kim prepared to begin having the girls interpret the survey and interview data, despite her better judgement to wait until after class, she handed Brandi a copy of the pictures that were part of another aspect of the project. Brandi took the pictures saying, “Thank you. It is Christmas for me!” She immediately began to look through her photos and share them with Alexandria. Her comments reflected great excitement as she exclaimed, “That’s cute! [pause] That’s cute! [pause] That’s cute! [pause] Ahhh, cute! [pause] That’s a messed up one right there; I look cock-eyed!”

Kim tried to explain to the group what she wanted them to do during the session:

Alright, let me explain what we’re going to do. I know you’re excited today but we have things to do now . . . Remember how you interviewed somebody? I went through and I made a copy of everybody’s surveys so that you have that. But what we’re going to do over the next couple of weeks is write a letter to the editor about girls’ perceptions of the Beauty Walk . . . I’d like each of you to start talking a little bit about what the girls you interviewed said. Jaylnn, why don’t you start?

During Kim’s explanation, Alexandria and Brandi continued viewing the pictures. Kim turned to them. ‘You two have to listen’. Brandi replied, ‘I’m listening! I promise you. I promise you.’ Destiny tried to get Alexandria and Brandi to pay attention: ‘Cut it out, Ladies!’ Brandi replied, ‘I’m listening’. Kim looked at her, ‘But you’re not’. Everyone, including Kim, burst into laughter. After a pause, Kim continued:

OK, tell us, shhhh [pause], you all need to take notes . . . See, this is why I wasn’t going to bring you these [the pictures] until the end of class. Put them away . . . This is your task . . . I want you to jot down things that you think would be good to go in a letter to an editor.

Kim structured the data analysis process as a means to letter writing. Rather than attend to that task, both Alexandria and Brandi continued reviewing the photos Brandi had taken. Destiny and Kim attempted to get their attention, to no avail. Even so, Kim and the girls were able to laugh together about the conflict that occurred between Alexandria’s and Brandi’s wishes for engagement and Kim’s.

Finally, Jaylnn began sharing some of what she learned from her interviews. ‘Number 12 [Why do they have a Beauty Walk for girls and not boys?]’. She said, ‘Beautiful is not fit for boys’. ‘Hum? That’s interesting’, said Kim. Brandi repeated the response, offering her assessment of it: ‘Beautiful is not fit for boys. I like that! I happen to like that!’

After Jaylnn finished reporting her interview data, Destiny began: ‘I asked her why she wasn’t in the Beauty Walk and she said, “You have to do too much to get prepared. For instance, to buy a dress and get your nails did and hair and etc. You know”’.

Kim addressed the group, using questions to relate the response to the issue of fairness that she had told them would be a topic in their letter to the editor of the newspaper. ‘Let me ask you a question. Do you think that that might contribute to how it’s unfair to girls that you have to “do too much”'
[pause], that you have to spend a lot of money. Can that be unfair to girls? The girls agreed that this was an example of how the Beauty Walk was unfair. Kim continued, suggesting a means for keeping track of examples of unfairness in the Beauty Walk. 'OK, so we need to kind of keep a list of how it's unfair to girls and part of it is ... you have to do too much ... buy a lot, spend a lot of money'.

As the girls continued sharing what survey respondents had said, Kim interjected comments to focus the girls' attention on the issue of fairness. She also emphasized certain responses, often causing the girls to consider them at greater length.

**Brandi:** I asked Serena why didn’t she want to be in the Beauty Walk, and she said she thought it was a popularity contest and it was unfair. I should have asked her why it was unfair, but I didn’t think of that ... And I asked her, why do the girls have a right to show off their bodies?

**Kim:** OK, wait a minute. So Landview [School] has a Beauty Walk so girls get to show off their bodies?

**Brandi:** I guess so.

**Kim:** That’s an interesting thing for a school to support, isn’t it?

**Brandi:** [Survey question] Number 8, she described how the Beauty Walk might be unfair to girls. She said, ‘they show off their bodies to paying people’.

**Alexandria:** To what?

**Brandi:** To paying people.

**Alexandria:** That’s kinda like a strip club, ain’t it?

**Kim:** You got it!

**Brandi:** She said, ‘Someone is making a profit off their body. Almost would consider them prostitutes.’

**Destiny:** Wait a minute; say it again. That was good!

**Brandi:** Someone is making a profit off of them [pause], off their body.

**Kim:** Any of you considered this concept?

**Brandi:** Nope.

**Alexandria:** It’s just like a strip club, but they keep their clothes on.

**Kim:** I think that this needs to be somewhere right up front, don’t you? In our letter.

**Alexandria:** Like, right in the front.

The girls continued in their analysis, each taking a turn to report what the respondents had told them. They seemed eager to share and to consider various meanings for the responses. They spent considerable time exploring issues of fairness and discrimination. Even though Kim often encouraged these critiques, the girls' engagement appeared genuine. They offered several suggestions and built on each other's interpretations, and they offered their assessments of the ideas being generated. It was as if knowledge about what other girls said about the event stimulated them to become more critical themselves. They frequently used the language of the survey respondents to help them articulate their critiques.
Writing letters to the editor

After the girls finished going through their interviews and survey data, Kim focused the girls’ attention on the final task in the inquiry process. The task continued for four sessions. Kim explained that the final portion of the inquiry project was to write a letter to a newspaper editor about girls’ perceptions of the Beauty Walk. Kim provided the girls with a task-sheet outlining what she wanted them to consider while writing their letters. The task-sheet was rather extensive. It included six directions: to use the surveys and interview data to help with letters; to use as much detail as possible; to use examples and quotes from the surveys/interviews; to look for how the Beauty Walk is unfair to girls, and why; to look for the ways that the Beauty Walk is unhealthy for girls, and why; and to focus on the possible advantages and disadvantages of the Beauty Walk, and why.

In addition to the task sheet, Kim also explained orally the topics she wanted the girls to include in the letter:

You have to use your surveys. You have to come up with ideas that you think are important...So, describe what the Beauty Walk is...and the reason they have a Beauty Walk...Tell what the girls have to do to get ready...Talk about how much it might cost...How does this thing make girls feel about themselves? How do people behave toward girls who are in the Beauty Walk? All of these things...and you’ve got answers to these because you’ve asked girls...But you have to get yourselves organized which means one of you has to write and one of you has to flip through things and pick out things you think are important.

To help the girls in the process, Kim reminded them of some of the things that they had discussed the week before, and she offered to let them use her notes. Alexandria, who earlier remarked on how ‘cool’ letter-writing would be, objected to the task. ‘Can’t we do something else?’ Kim responded, ‘Nope. Not until this is done. Once this is done we can do something else.’ Brandi replied, ‘Alright. We’re writing. We’re writing this letter.’

Destiny and Jaylinn began working together intently, following the directions that Kim provided to help them structure their letter and clarify their ideas. They continued in this way for four sessions, periodically speaking up to quiet the two other girls. Remarks such as, ‘Shhh, I’m trying to think’, or ‘Shhh, I’m trying to concentrate’, were typical comments by Destiny.

Alexandria and Brandi continued talking and giggling. ‘My brain is dead!’ exclaimed Brandi. Even so, Alexandria and Brandi worked on their letter for one entire session, composing in a collaborative manner without seeking help from Kim. During this time they discussed strategies for writing. They considered what they should write and how they could make their points stronger about ‘discrimination’ and ‘prostitution in schools’. However, their intense work on the task was short-lived, lasting for only one session. For the remaining three sessions they worked in fits and starts, and only with constant prodding by Kim and the other girls.
For her part, Kim tried several strategies to keep them working. At one point she tried to help the girls relate the letter-writing task to their expressed interest in boys:

*Kim:* I would really like it if you just finished this part and then we can be done with this.

*Brandi:* I can’t! I tried to focus, but I just can’t.

*Kim:* Well, what does this have to do with boys?

*Brandi:* Nothing! That’s the point. Nothing!

*Kim:* I’m not sure I agree. A Beauty Walk.

*Brandi:* Wasn’t no boys in it.

*Kim:* There were a lot of boys there... What about the whole idea of girls being beautiful, [pause] needing to be beautiful. This teaches girls that what they’re most noticed for is what?

*Alexandria:* What they look like.

*Kim:* Their bodies and what they look like. What does that have to do with boys? [Brandi sighs].

*Alexandria:* Boys look at them, but that’s about it.

*Kim:* What does it have to do with self-esteem?

*Alexandria:* I don’t know.

*Kim:* Oh, you do know. You’re just not thinking about it.

*Alexandria:* That’s the point. I’m not thinking about it. I never think about stuff like that... I’m tired!... My mind has been long gone about this subject... Let’s conversate [sic].

*Kim:* About what?

*Destiny:* [offering a preferred alternative topic] Boys!

Alexandria and Brandi spent the remainder of the session talking about boys. They did not work on their letters, despite all the attempts Kim made to redirect their energy to the task.

During the next session, Kim used the girls’ interest in cameras to entice Alexandria and Brandi to finish their letter. After the girls had a rough draft of their letter, Kim said, “I would like you to get your letter as close to finished as possible. I will then proof-read it, and next week we’ll put the very final touches on, and I’ll give you your cameras [for the next task].”

*Brandi:* We are close to finished!

*Kim:* You’re close.

*Alexandria:* You said ‘close to finished’, ah, you done said ‘close to finished’.

*Kim:* But you’re not finished.

*Alexandria:* Close to finishing, that’s what you said.

*Brandi:* You did. You didn’t say finished. You said ‘as close’.

*Alexandria:* See you be changing your words, see.


*Alexandria:* Too bad, I ain’t finishing.

*Kim:* OK, this is your task. We don’t get to move on to the pictures until this is done.

*Alexandria:* I guess we won’t be movin’.
Kim: I’ll give you your cameras before Spring Break, but only if this is done. You don’t get the camera until this is done.

Brandi: This is done!

Alexandria: Girl, let’s finish the letter so she’ll shut up. And that way you can shut up, and then I can shut up, and then we can have our cameras.

Despite attempts by Kim and Destiny to get Alexandria and Brandi back on task, they continued to talk about topics of interest for the remainder of the session. Even so, the following week they produced a rough draft of their letter, while discussing an assortment of other topics.

To Whom It May Concern:

We’re writing this letter to express our concern about the Beauty Walk . . . We’re concerned about the following: the discrimination against girls, because of racism, and how it makes girls feel about themselves. Most girls that we surveyed think the Beauty Walk is unfair to females. Some girls don’t have the money to buy needed supplies . . . ‘Girls show off their bodies to paying people’ [quote from a survey]. People are paying to see these girls. They seem like prostitutes and the girls didn’t get anything. Racism is a big issue in the Beauty Walk. One student thinks, ‘If the judges are White, a White girl will win. If the judges are Black, a Black girl might win.’ Another student says, ‘Race shouldn’t have anything to do with the Beauty Walk’. There are many advantages and disadvantages to the Beauty Walk. Some girls’ self-esteem is lowered while others is raised . . . One student says, ‘Also, only one girl wins and the rest get nothing’. In conclusion, we think that the Beauty Walk is unfair. It raises one girl’s self-esteem by cutting down other girl’s self-esteem. We don’t think that should be taught in schools. Basically, the Beauty Walk should be abolished.

While Destiny and Jaylinn worked to complete their letter, Kim asked the girls to evaluate the inquiry process.

Kim: Do you think it’s important for girls to learn how to critique things like this?

Brandi: No.

Kim: How come?

Brandi: Waste of time.

Kim: Why?

Brandi: I don’t know . . . I like coming to this group. I just don’t like all the writing.

Kim: You don’t like all the writing?

Brandi: I like when we discuss things.
Alexandria: I hate writing letters . . . I love talk.
Kim: OK, why don’t you discuss girls’ ideas about the Beauty Walk.
Alexandria: That’s not my subject. I told you that the first time you said that.
Kim: OK, what’s your subject?
Alexandria: Boys!
Kim: Alright, what about them?

At this point, the project ended for Alexandria, Brandi, and Jaylnn. While these three girls talked with Kim about boys, Destiny finished the letter that Jaylnn and she had been working on for three-and-a-half sessions. When the session ended, Destiny had a bit more work to do; thus she elected to stay in during her break between classes to finish the letter. Destiny and Jaylnn entitled their letter, ‘Beauty Walk: Prostitution in schools’. In it they explained several objections to the Beauty Walk.

Concerned students say Beauty Walk (BW) discriminates, is unfair, and is almost equal to prostitution. The BW is an event that sells tickets to students, parents, and friends to see 8th-grade young women parade around on the stage in pretty, expensive, and fancy gowns. According to 8th-grade girls, BW is ‘unfair’ because girls are judged by their looks, not by character, talent, or any other quality. Also BW costs too much money. Therefore girls that do not have enough money can’t afford to participate. Girls have to get their nails and hair done, buy a dress and shoes . . . Most girls don’t have enough money for those kinds of things. They don’t have to do these things, but they are afraid if they come as themselves, the everyday person that they are, that they really won’t win. That lowers most girls’ self-esteem . . . Also because only one girl wins and that makes every other girl feel ‘not so beautiful’ . . . Some of the girls say that the BW discriminates by race because most of the time it’s a White girl that wins . . . They also say that most of the people that are judges are White. The 8th-grade girls say that’s ‘racist’ because the judges are White and the girl that wins or the girls in the top 10 are White . . . What I’m trying to say is that there’s no need for a school to have such a ‘bad’ fund-raiser for school. It makes girls feel bad about themselves.

Discussion

In this paper we raised two questions: (1) How did Kim initiate and support the girls’ engagement in an inquiry process designed to help girls critique the ways their bodies are implicated in schools’ hidden curriculum?; and (2) How did the girls interact with Kim throughout the process? Through a micro-level analysis of the verbal interactions (Gee 2000) between Kim and the girls, we observed several participation patterns. In the following discussion, we highlight these patterns of participation and consider them in relation to Lather’s (1991:16) question, ‘how do our efforts to liberate perpetuate the relations of dominance’. In particular, we examine this question in relation to points that Shor (1992) makes about selecting topical themes for students to study, and the points that Gee (2000) makes about ownership of the curriculum.
Unlike our previous work (Oliver and Lalik 2000, 2001, Oliver 2001) where the girls’ interests guided the conversation and inquiry, Kim created both the topic agenda and the processes by which the girls would critically engage with the topic. Following Shor (1992: 127), Kim selected ‘The Beauty Walk’ as a topic because it was part of the school’s hidden curriculum that implicated girls’ bodies and because in our view, as mentioned above, it was a ‘theme . . . closely related to the main purpose of the project . . . [that] relied on idioms that students understand’.

After introducing ‘The Beauty Walk’ as the topic for study, Kim used a variety of strategies to scaffold the girls’ development of a verbal critique. One strategy she used was to import critique from ‘other girls’ into the conversation. She used this strategy because in our previous research we had learned that girls are often better able to critique concepts when they were discussing the views of ‘other girls’ (Oliver and Lalik 2000). When interjecting views of ‘other girls’, Kim relied heavily on girls’ criticisms of the Beauty Walk. For example, Kim reported that other girls had said, ‘only White girls win, so it’s a waste of time’.

In addition to importing other girls’ negative views of the Beauty Walk, Kim also provided the girls with portions of her personal critique of the Beauty Walk, focusing especially on the inequitable aspects of the school activity. For example, she explained, ‘I’m just trying to understand why schools would have activities that put girls in the position of being judged on the way they look. I don’t understand that’, and ‘I’m just trying to figure out . . . why a school has this type of event . . . They don’t put the boys up there [on stage] and parade them around and judge them on how they look. Why do they do it to the girls?’

Kim routinely elaborated on the girls’ criticisms when they occurred. When Brandi reported that ‘Some girls might want to be in the Beauty Walk, but they might not have the money to purchase their gowns and have their hair done’, Kim elaborated on her comment, ‘While they may say that anybody can be in it [the Beauty Walk], it costs a lot of money; so it discriminates against people who don’t have money they can spend on frivolous stuff’.

Kim frequently re-presented the girls’ language in ways that highlighted its negative aspects. For example, when Brandi reported her interview with Serena saying, ‘I asked her, why do the girls have a right to show off their bodies?’ Kim interjected, ‘OK, wait a minute. So Landview [School] has a Beauty Walk so girls get to show off their bodies . . . That’s an interesting thing for a school to support, isn’t it?’

Kim related pieces of the girls’ theories of the Beauty Walk, reframing them in terms pertinent to critique. For example, when the girls discussed how the Beauty Walk stereotyped girls, Kim explained, ‘So that means we have assumptions. We have stereotypes about beauty, then. What are our stereotypes about beauty according to what people will be judged on?’

Kim used several additional strategies to evoke criticism of the Beauty Walk. She invited bits and pieces of criticism from the girls themselves, for example, when she asked them to ‘list everything that is wrong about this whole activity. What are all the bad things about it?’ Kim also engaged the girls in criticism of the Beauty Walk by repeating selected statements they
had made, asking them to elaborate on their meaning, directing their attention to aspects of the situation that might inspire further criticism, summarizing and elaborating their analysis, and inviting judgement.

Besides shaping the critique of the Beauty Walk, Kim designed the major tasks through which the inquiry was conducted (i.e. survey construction, interviews, data analysis, and letter-writing). She introduced each structure and explained to the girls how she wanted them to proceed, often providing them with a written task outline to follow as they worked.

In the beginning of the inquiry the girls had little to say about the Beauty Walk, a response pattern that made us believe that the Beauty Walk was a taken-for-granted topic. Even Brandi, who initially indicated an interest in participating, openly expressed personal ignorance. ‘I don’t know what I think about it; I don’t know what other people think about it. I don’t know what anyone thinks about it’. Her lack of knowledge about the topic suggested that it had been ‘absorbed uncritically in school . . . ’ (Shor 1992: 119). Thus we were reminded that Shor (1992) has suggested that examination of such topics is a fundamental responsibility of the teacher who legitimately serves as a more informed adult guide.

The girls’ patterns of participation throughout this inquiry project varied across tasks and among the four girls. At times they were resistant, and at other times they were actively engaged in the tasks. For example, Alexandria initially and periodically shared her lack of interest in the topic, ‘This ain’t my topic’, and she clearly named her preferred subject, ‘Like boys, that’s my subject right there’. Kim could have used this interest in boys as a topic for further consideration and possible critique as one effort to encourage the girls’ ownership over the curriculum (Gee 2000). However, convinced of the critical need to study the Beauty Walk, she ignored Alexandria’s suggestion, using it only occasionally, for example, when she invoked the topic as an enticement for completing the surveys.

At times, the girls were enthusiastic and actively engaged in the tasks, for example, when they worked for 60 minutes to reword a survey question about race in response to Brandi’s proposal: ‘I think we should [have a question], but we have to find a way to word it so people don’t get offended’. We also saw it when the girls analysed the survey data. When the girls were actively engaged, Kim was highly supportive of their interests. For example, Kim expended considerable time and energy and served as assistant to the girls as they designed survey questions.

In spite of their initial reluctance to consider the Beauty Walk, the girls’ behaviour during several tasks in the inquiry process suggests that they were developing skills of critical inquiry. For example, the girls appeared to be learning how to interpret data. They were able to note patterns in the survey responses and relate those patterns to broader issues that influence the ways girls learn to think about their bodies. One example of this behaviour occurred in an exchange between Brandi and Alexandria:

Brandi: [Survey question] Number 8 . . . she said ‘they show off their bodies to paying people’.

Alexandria: That’s kinda like a strip club, ain’t it? . . . [B]ut they keep their clothes on.
Finally, the girls’ patterns of participation indicate that they were learning a language of critique insofar as they could produce arguments about problems with the Beauty Walk. We saw these arguments in their verbal interactions, as well as in their written letters to the editor. Both the letter that Destiny and Jaylin laboured over intently for several sessions and the one written with sporadic efforts by Alexandria and Brandi contained examples of these arguments.

Throughout the inquiry process the girls participated in theory-building about the Beauty Walk. When accepting Kim’s presumption that the Beauty Walk was unfair to girls, Alexandria elaborated, ‘If the boys get to look at the girls, then the girls should be able to look at the boys’. Although the girls also introduced novel ideas, those ideas did not resist Kim’s view. Alexandria claimed that beauty was a ‘feminine’ concept and that ‘Beautiful is not fit for boys’. Brandi named this phenomenon by saying that there are ‘double standards’ for girls. Alexandria claimed that because ‘someone is making a profit off their bodies’ that the Beauty Walk was equivalent to a ‘strip club, but [girls] keep their clothes on’. At one point, the girls expressed the belief that the winner of the Beauty Walk earned ‘more respect’. While further development of this notion might have led to alternative views of the Beauty Walk, Kim did not pursue the line of thinking.

In spite of the intensity of the inquiry tasks, a thread of playfulness ran through the sessions. Playfulness was evident in the girls’ singing that occurred frequently while they were completing inquiry tasks, and in the frequency of social talk, talk about a topic that interested them, such as boys and who was going with whom. Furthermore, laughter was a characteristic element in interactions between the girls and Kim. For example, when the girls, using theatrical voices, began to role-play as interviewers and respondents, all participants burst into laughter. Another aspect of the playfulness was evident in the familiarity of language that the girls used with Kim. For example, even while Alexandria and Brandi were objecting to continuing their work on the letter to the editor—a direction that Kim repeated in a variety of forms—the girls played with Kim’s request that they get their letter ‘as close to finished as possible’.

The girls’ consistent attendance at these voluntary sessions, their completion of the challenging inquiry tasks, and their periods of active engagement support Shor’s views that taken-for-granted topics such as the Beauty Walk might be worth introducing to students. However, what we did not see in this study, as we had when we concentrated on inquiry centred on girls’ interests (Oliver and Lalik 2000, 2001), was a point in the project in which the girls transformed the curriculum into something that they, not Kim, owned. In other words, inquiry on the Beauty Walk never became their project. It was Kim’s project, although they were willing to go along with it and from time to time participate enthusiastically. Thus we are left agreeing with Shor (1992) that while introducing topical themes might be worthwhile, it may not be the most appropriate way to engage students in critical reflection.

Furthermore, by developing a curriculum that focused heavily on a criticism of the Beauty Walk, we wonder whether we did not inadvertently replace one form of hegemonic discourse with another (Luke and Gore
In this case, the hegemonic discourse is the preconceived critique that Kim presented and reiterated for students' acceptance by engaging them in a succession of strategies and activities. It is a discourse that consistently ignored and downplayed alternative more positive assessments of the Beauty Walk. Our micro-level analysis suggests that our approach may be viewed as an example of how those in power promote their desired discourse (Ellsworth 1992). In doing so, we may have inadvertently sacrificed the development of the girls' critical judgement by enforcing a conclusion about the Beauty Walk that grew out of our adult (and earlier-acknowledged socially distant) subjectivities, judgements, and experiences. Might we have rather provided instead an example of a discourse that nurtures critical reflection without insisting on a particular critique?

Because we believed that, as a school-sponsored event, the Beauty Walk is part of a larger cultural perspective that is destructive to girls and women, we wanted the girls to learn our critique of it. We reasoned that, in the end, this critique would become part of the girls' discursive repertoires, available to them in making life choices. And the girls' letters suggest that they indeed had become conversant with our preferred critique of the Beauty Walk.

Given the difficulties of creating liberatory curricula and curricular processes (Gore 1992), we are reminded of the need to respond to an important question that Dillon and Moje (1998: 222) have asked. That is, how might teachers and researchers 'negotiate the fine distinction between valuing what adolescent students have to say and moving them toward challenging, disrupting, and reconstructing their experiences and discourses'? This study provides some insight on this question, while supporting the need for continued study of it and related questions.

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Notes

1. Names of the school and students are pseudonyms.
2. Data sources for this study included audio-recordings of each work-session in which time was used for the inquiry task, as well as transcriptions of those recordings. Data also included researcher- and student-generated products relevant to the inquiry. Products included the written instructions that Kim developed, surveys created by the girls, and letters and written analyses that the girls created to communicate their learning and influence others. The field notes that Kim wrote following each session with the girls were another data source. In them, she documented details of the project not recorded on tape, such as records of conversations with the teacher, and her own relevant questions, concerns, and plans. In all, 13 audio tapes, 325 pages of transcriptions of audio recordings, 80 documents, and 35 pages of field notes were analysed.

To analyse the data we, working alone and together, read and reread all transcripts, listened repeatedly to the session recordings, and examined all documents, including transcriptions. We returned to these data using the constant comparison method (Glaser
and Strauss 1967) to determine themes reflected in the data and to discern ways that those themes played out in the activities and interactions occurring during the inquiry sessions (Bogdan and Biklen 1998). We generated a list of eight themes and recorded all relevant data for each theme.

We used our lists to generate a set of assertions (Erickson 1986) expressing relationships between and among themes. Next, we returned to the corpus of data, reviewing it recursively to modify and refine our assertions until all data were explained. We organized our assertions into an outline in which, through listing and notation, we tied each assertion to its relevant data. Finally, we used our outline as a basis for writing a draft of our interpretations. We developed a set of successive drafts, working each time to articulate more clearly, elaborate, and refine our assertions, and to illustrate clearly yet concisely the supporting data (Alvermann et al. 1996).

References


