

Food Chains, Frenemies, and Revenge Fantasies: Relating Fiction to Life in a Girls' Book Club

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Abstract

In this article, we explore the experiences of four girls with reading difficulties who participated in a book club designed to promote critical discussion of sociocultural gendered issues. Using the book Dork diaries: Tales from a NOT-SO- fabulous life, they connected content in the book to their lives as relates to school "food chains," frenemies, and revenge fantasies. The participants demonstrated the complex ways in which their reading of texts intersects with literary, educational, and societal gender issues, expounding the need for an ongoing problematization of girls' representations and experiences.

Keywords: book clubs, critical literacy, girls, struggling readers, children's literature, gender

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Introduction

Why are girls represented as "dorks" and boys as "wimpy"? How might girls respond to these categorizations? Do graphic novels hinder or support learning, particularly for those who struggle with reading? How can girls be supported in learning to read as well as in critiquing societal gender issues? These are the questions that drew us to this research. Precipitated by an analysis of diary cartoon novels (Taber & Woloshyn, 2011a), and grounded in the literature discussed below, we set out to understand how girls who struggle with reading would respond to a girl empowerment book club, using the lens of "dorks" as an entry point. We believe that it is crucial to support girls in reading for critique as well as for understanding.

In this article, we explore the experiences of four girls with reading difficulties participating in a book club designed to promote critical discussion of sociocultural gendered issues. First, we discuss literature that examines girls' experiences with literacy, the gendered content of children's/young adult books, and the use of book clubs for reading improvement and critical literacy. Next, we detail our case study methodology and briefly present the content of the selected text. Then, we explore our findings of the following themes that emerged from the girls' discussions of the book and their lives: school "food chains," frenemies, and revenge fantasies.

Girls' Literacy, Gendered Texts, and Book Clubs

Girls are increasingly being represented as opponents against boys in a competition for scarce educational resources. Cries of *what about the boys?* abound (Baskwill, Church, & Swain, 2009), while girls continue to be marginalized (Fenwick, 2004; Osler, 2006; Sadker & Sadker, 2005) and often blamed for their own lack of success (Gonick, 2003; Ferri & Connor, 2010). Girls' marginalization is particularly prevalent with respect to learning exceptionalities. For girls who struggle with reading, early and continued interventions are required to support success in the language arts (Sprague & Keeling, 2009). However, girls are often overlooked by their teachers as boys' needs typically receive more attention (Osler, 2006), with the result that boys are more likely to be considered for extra support (Ferri & Connor, 2010; Sadker & Sadker, 2005).

In order to be successful learners, it is critical that students understand texts in deep and meaningful manners that allow them to analyze the content critically with respect to sociocultural issues (Gavelek & Bresnahan, 2009; Zipes, 2002). Such depth of process (and engagement with texts, see Scheffel, 2012) is difficult for many students, especially those who experience reading difficulties (Edmunds & Edmunds, 2008; Winzer, 2007). For girls, the difficulties can be even more complex, particularly when an inability to conform to grade-level requirements is attributed solely to personal failure with no consideration of systemic inequities (Ferri & Connor, 2010). If girls behave well, any underperformance is "likely to be overlooked," with boys gaining attention and extra support (Osler, 2006, p. 574). Girls (particularly young women of colour, but also girls in general) "often fall under the radar" when considerations are made with respect to participation in programmes and resources intended for those with learning disabilities (Ferri & Connor, 2010, p. 107). For those who are not necessarily diagnosed with a disability but nonetheless struggle with reading, access to assistance may be even more elusive. Girls' exclusion from school resources is "a form of systemic violence" (Osler, 2006, p. 572) wherein their needs and experiences are often overlooked, leading to their educational marginalization.

Girls' marginalization is present not only in their school experiences, but in the content with which they interact. With respect to children's literature, female characters are typically represented stereotypically and/or tangentially. Children's books more often have plotlines with boys as central characters than girls (McCabe, Fairchild, Grauerholz, Pescosolido & Tope, 2011) and typically represent girls and boys in stereotypical ways that privilege boys as active characters and girls as more passive ones (Diekman & Murnen, 2004), demonstrating "a heteronormative reinforcement of traditional femininities and hegemonic masculinities" (Taber & Woloshyn, 2011a, p. 239). Furthermore, much young adult fiction "contains many representations of young women that reinforce negative body-image stereotypes" (Younger, 2003, p. 46) and privilege girls' looks over other aspects of their identity. Certainly, some books do centre on girls as strong independent main characters, but they are typically represented as individuals who can do anything, if only they stand up to sexism, without an acknowledgement of the social systems that serve to marginalize women (Hubler, 2000). In still other books that ostensibly celebrate the power of girls' friendships, girls are shown to crave, above all else, male companionship and attention (McInally, 2008). In certain award winning books, girls are represented as "change agents capable of engaging in meaningful critique of societal hierarchies and norms" but "usually did so only after male characters were no longer available, able, or willing to do so" (Taber & Woloshyn, 2011b, p. 899). As Marshall (2004) states, "literature written for children...surface[s] as cultural products tied to a discursive legacy that attempts to regulate and define children's bodies in terms of gender and sexuality" (p. 259).

It is therefore important to problematize the various ways that girls are represented in texts. Furthermore, it is necessary to investigate the "readers' role in constructing textual meaning" (Hubler, 2000, p. 90). Children do not simply passively receive messages from texts, but make their own interpretations of stories and characters based on their understandings of the world. Reading, as Cherland (1994) argues, is "a social practice, shaped by gender, race, and class, that is lived in complicated ways in people's lives" (p. 10). For instance, Davies (2003) explores preschool children's responses to feminist fairy tales, discovering that social scripts are more powerful in affecting how they made meaning of stories than the content of the story itself. It is crucial to engage with children and deconstruct the texts that they read, whether the story is stereotypical or feminist, or somewhere in between. Educators can assist students in "'locat[ing] a space' from which they can critique and rewrite familiar but destructive cultural storylines" (Trousdale & McMillan, 2003, p. 26).

Book clubs (also referred to as literature circles or learning clubs) are one way in which children can learn to become better readers (Casey, 2008/2009; Certo, Moxley, Reffitt & Miller, 2010; Whittingham & Huffman, 2009). Participation in book clubs can enable readers to use a book's content to engage in a societal critique for women (Twomey, 2007) and explore issues of self-image by connecting texts to real life for girls (Polleck, 2010). Although there is a growing body of research about book clubs as learning environments, there is a lack of literature on book clubs with a gendered sociocultural focus for adolescent girls who are struggling readers (particularly with respect to out-of-school clubs). In fact, in one research project with a school book club (Broughton, 2009), the researcher specifically focused on academically average or above average girls who enjoyed reading due to a belief that they were more likely to maintain commitment to the project and catch up on any work they missed due to their participation. This preference for girls performing well academically demonstrates yet another way in which girls who struggle with reading (and therefore may claim not to enjoy it) are often marginalized. Our

research thus aims to work with girls who struggle with reading to improve their comprehension skills as well as introduce societal issues related to gender and self-empowerment.

Methodology: Book Club Case Study

Our research was focused on exploring the experiences of junior-intermediate grade level girls who experience reading difficulties in a book club designed to promote critical discussion of sociocultural gendered issues. The research followed Merriam's (1998) sociological interpretive case-study format wherein our focus was on a particularistic setting with thick description aiming for heuristic understanding. The unit of analysis of our case was a book club for girls who "struggle" with reading (i.e., demonstrated below grade level decoding and comprehension scores as indicated by parental, teacher and self reports and/or psycho-educational assessments). As such, we believed that these participants may be especially reluctant to read and discuss books, thus missing opportunities to improve their comprehension and critical analysis abilities. Invitations to participate were sent to eight girls from grades 5-8 attending a local reading clinic who met the recruitment requirements. The parents of four girls responded and agreed to participate. The girls' pseudonyms (chosen by the participants) were Aryton (grade 5), Madison (grade 6), Bridget (grade 7), and Taylor (grade 7). All four girls stated that they disliked reading and were "not good" at it.

Each participant was shown three books—*The Skin I'm In* (Flake, 1998/2007), *Ella Enchanted* (Levine, 1997), and *Dork Diaries: Tales from a NOT-SO-Fabulous Life* (Russell, 2009)—from which to choose for discussion in the book club. These three books were narrowed down from a much larger selection of books, by the faculty members, about girls that would suit this age group and provide content we could discuss from a gendered sociological perspective. Each of the girls chose *Dork Diaries: Tales from a NOT-SO-Fabulous Life* (Russell, 2009).

In order to provide an estimate of the girls' overall decoding and comprehension skills and confirm the appropriateness of the selected reading material, the girls completed the San Diego graded word list and graded reading passages contained in the *Ekwall/Shanker Reading Inventory 5th Edition* (Shanker & Cockrum, 2009). They then participated in an individual interview. They were asked for their responses to short poems about girls, to explain their thoughts about reading, and to describe their everyday life as a girl. The book club took an activity-based approach, designed to engage readers in the text, prompt discussion, and promote reading enjoyment (e.g., reading together, reviewing/predicting/summarizing, drama and role plays, script writing, diagramming and imagery, reader response journals, critical questioning, dialogue, film viewing). In between sessions, the participants completed reading on their own (supported by audio-recordings of the book as needed) and engaged in brief response exercises. The exit interview entailed providing a second response to the poems and discussing their experiences in the book club. In these ways, our approach demonstrated the importance of acknowledging and integrating multimodalities and multiliteracies in learning (Rowell & Walsch, 2011). For us, literacy takes many forms and should be connected to social context; it is not simply about decoding and basic comprehension. Analysis was completed using Merriam's (1998) case study application of Glaser and Strauss's (1967) constant comparative method. Researchers individually coded the data for themes, then met for collaborative analysis sessions, agreeing on the final themes.

Our case was a unique one, as it was constructed entirely by the researchers. We wanted to create as secure a place as possible for the participants to engage in reading, dialogue about

the content of the book, create meaning, and explore sociocultural gender issues. (See Lane, Taber, & Woloshyn (2012) for an extended discussion of the ways in which we negotiated our various roles as facilitators, advocates for girl empowerment, and researchers). The book club was held in an off-site multi-use campus building in the evening hours, when we were frequently the only occupants. We had access to a large comfortable meeting room and a kitchen. For each session, we brought snacks that related to the content of the book (in one case, hosting a spaghetti dinner), as well as played games and facilitated ice-breakers to help the girls become comfortable.

Participants were encouraged to relate the book to their lives by exploring text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world connections. The book club was not intended to be an extension of schooling, but a created space for learning and promoting girl empowerment. By providing the opportunity for the participants to bond with each other, create a level of mutual trust, share thoughts, and critically discuss "being a girl," we intended to not only "research" but facilitate, in a Freirean (2000; see also hooks, 1994) way, with a gendered reading of the word and the world.

Dork Diaries is a cartoon novel presenting a mixture of prose and images that focus on the life of Nikki, a working-class scholarship student who is a "dork" at a private school. She encounters a clique of popular, rich, "mean girls" led by MacKenzie who she "hates" while at the same time wishing she were part of their group. The book centres on her developing relationship with two other girls, her crush on a boy, and their conflicts with the mean girls. (See Taber & Woloshyn, 2011a, for an extended analysis of this and other diary cartoon novels that explores representations of girls as "dumb" and "dorky" and boys as "wimpy".)

Findings and Discussion

Throughout the book club sessions, the girls focused on the popularity of the rich, pretty, fashionable mean girls, paradoxically condemning them while coveting their status. They discussed school "food chains" based on hierarchies of popularity, frenemies (where enemies were also coveted friends), and revenge fantasies as a way of coping with bullying and exclusion.

"Food Chains"

Madison introduced the idea of school "food chains" – a concept that resonated strongly with the group and became a main theme of their subsequent discussions. The conversation began after reading a section of the book where Nikki was tripped by one of MacKenzie's mean girl friends in the cafeteria. The image in the book is of a map of the cafeteria, with groups of students segregating themselves at various tables. After reading this section, we asked the girls to collaboratively create their own representation of their schools using cut-outs (e.g., of stick figures, sports equipment, tables) and markers (see Figure 1 below).



Figure 1. Representation of school areas

In explaining their diagrams, Madison discussed how most people “hang out” in separate groups. Where you sit depends on “where your status is.” She pointed to the popularity graph she drew (centre right of photo), calling it a “food chain.” (Note: The book club she is discussing is not the book club for struggling readers explored here, but a school book club.) She stated:

This as you can see are the jocks, top of the food chain, as I said, not the brightest of the bunch but at the top for some reason. Cheerios [cheerleaders] ...also known as part of the dating group...known to be the second number of the food chain... Now, this is the art people. They’re kind in the mixture of both, and...this is the book club... the people who stay after school and come early ... and stay in recesses to help teachers and also reads books 24/7, basically. And this is me [down near the bottom]. Mostly people when this [move down the food chain] happens, you don’t really have to worry about the popularity thing, but you might wanna watch out for the jocks. The jocks mostly have their attention to A) annoy you or B) call you names, or 3) kinda play a few pranks on you, such as maybe tripping you during gym class or maybe making rumors about you.

What is particularly interesting is how Madison specifically rates the jocks (boys) above the cheerleaders (girls) at the same time as she wonders about the specific attributes of the jocks that afford them popularity. She highlights the unfairness of the rating and explains that being near the bottom means that others “pick on you.” Madison believes that she does not fit well into any category, necessitating that she “try to hang out” with different groups. In relating the food

chain to the characters in *Dork Diaries*, the participants positioned MacKenzie near the top of the food chain, in the “Cheerios” category (even though she is not a cheerleader in the book). They equated gaining popularity with moving up the food chain, with the goal of becoming MacKenzie (or at least a member at the top of the chain). Her response demonstrates not only how popularity is often equated in books to conforming to various types of masculinity and femininity (Taber & Woloshyn, 2011a; McNally, 2008; Younger, 2003), in her case with girls as cheerleaders and boys as jocks, but demonstrates the need to explore these representations with a societal critique (Hubler, 2000; Kwan, 2010; Trousdale & McMillan, 2003).

In her exit interview, Madison again highlighted the importance of the food chain stating, “The food chain is something that everyone needs to know.... If you don’t, you’re gonna get trampled.” Furthermore, the chain is viewed as sacred and unchangeable. “The head cheerleader will always date the head football player. It’s basically like a tradition, okay. If that doesn’t happen, it’s like burning the Canadian flag to ‘em.” In order to protect oneself and survive, “You gotta stick together with [your own] group.” With the exception of Taylor, who claimed that students in her school “all kind of get mixed up together,” the other participants concurred with Madison’s analysis of the “food chain” and claimed that one existed in their schools as well.

Taylor expressed surprise at Madison’s personal placement of herself on the food chain. When questioned about the episode in her exit interview, Taylor replied, “It was like, ‘What? What is she doing?’” She continued, “I didn’t think she’d like share all that information about where she is in that little bar graph.” We believe that it was in these sorts of discussions in the book club, where the girls shared their daily lives and expressed their different perspectives and experiences that they began to challenge the food chain itself by becoming friends. Madison stated she had “kinda tried to sort them [the girls in the club] out into their own little groups” during the first session, but was unable to do so, explaining, “They’re [the group] kinda moving.” Although they each had different interests and went to different schools, the girls formed a collaborative group where each girl could feel welcomed, accepted, and belonged. Madison’s revelation and Taylor’s response demonstrates that the girls were willing to engage in difficult conversations that made them vulnerable, helping to bring them closer together (hooks, 1994).

In part of her response to a question about her favourite part of the book club, Taylor stated, “We got to do fun stuff and learn cool things about each other.” Bridget was originally nervous about who else might be in the club, explaining, “I didn’t really know what was gonna happen” because “some people are like mean.” She said that if there were mean people in the group, she would not be “talkative. I wouldn’t give my answers.” Bridget was very vocal and enthusiastic in the club, demonstrating her comfort with the other girls. There was no food chain, so to speak. Initially, as Bridget explained, “everybody was like quiet. They wouldn’t talk to other people. And by the end have everybody talking like they knew each other for like 20 years.” Gradually, the girls “weren’t scared to be themselves with their comfort with each other increasing across the sessions.” Aryton described herself normally as a “tag-along” who did not really fit in. But in book club, “I got to be my own person” who she described as “awesome.” The girls created their own niche where they formed their own allies and bonds, accepted each other, felt as if they belonged, and did not expect perfection. Ironically, they were enjoying reading a book about “mean girls” while demonstrating their own fear of being victimized (as “dorks”) by real people emulating the mean girl phenomena that has created and villainized (Gonick, 2003, 2004, 2006) a contemporary embodiment of girlhood. (See Taber & Woloshyn,

2011a, for a further discussion of the ways in which the concept of "mean girls" must be problematized, particularly as relates to young adult fiction.)

Frenemies

The girls' relation of food chains in the text to their own everyday lives, as well as with respect to their own friendships in the book club, is paralleled by their discussion of frenemies, which are, as Bridget explained, "friends that aren't really friends." Madison expanded, stating, "They're basically your enemies but they're kinda your friends. From time-to-time, they're your friends, and from time-to-time, you completely dislike them." The concept of frenemies was most relevant in context of mean girls, who are admired for being popular, pretty, and rich at the same time as they are despised for their nastiness and privilege. Taylor characterized the mean girls in the book as "rude, obnoxious, selfish, and spoiled." Madison said a mean girl "makes fun of peoples' clothes, what things that they like, who they hang out with, basically everything." Bridget stated, "MacKenzie thinks she's all that." The characters of Nikki and MacKenzie conformed to gendered scripts common in literature, with girls presented as victims *or* perpetrators, good *or* evil, deserving of punishment *or* pity (Taber & Woloshyn, 2011a; Baker-Sperry & Grauerholz, 2003; Marshall, 2004; Parsons, 2004); in short, as mean girls or dorks. Yet, despite her negative characteristics, MacKenzie is popular. However, the girls see the popularity as being tenuous and somewhat phony, qualifying that her friendships are based on others' desires not be bullied. In answer to the question, "Why is MacKenzie so popular?", the girls explained:

- Madison: Because she keeps on making fun of everybody else, so they wanna be her friend to feel good, and also she has all of these expensive clothes and they're thinking that if we're friends with her, we'll get something out of it...
- Bridget: I think because they don't wanna be bullied, so they're her friends so she doesn't be mean to them...
- Taylor: I think they might want to be with her because she won't be bullied, like people won't be bullied if they hang out with her.

The girls perceived MacKenzie's popularity to be based on her socioeconomic status, appearance, and position at the top of the food chain rather than her true character or identity. Nonetheless, for three of the four participants, MacKenzie was their favourite character. For instance, Aryton stated that MacKenzie was her favourite, "Because she was mean. I like the mean girls mostly....They always get their way....she's rich." However, at the same time, she acknowledges, unprompted, "That's not right though." Interestingly, Aryton stated that she related more to Nikki, but clearly would rather be MacKenzie. Bridget wanted to be MacKenzie as well, in order to be popular and respected. For Madison, both Nikki and MacKenzie are "awesome" although MacKenzie was "born awesome, like William Shakespeare."

The girls also recognized the falseness of these friendships. For instance, Madison believed that MacKenzie's awesomeness comes from her life of privilege, stating "MacKenzie has a little bit higher advantage with her life, with money." "She thinks she's perfect because she has a big house, a big bedroom, a big bathroom." The girls recognized that real friends were not frenemies, but those who cared for and accepted each other for who they were. In their exit

interviews, Bridget and Taylor commented that they felt they could be themselves in the club and that others could as well. Aryton perhaps most directly addressed the concept of frenemies (without using the word itself) when she compared her friends at home with those in the book club. She said she was relieved that no one in the book club was “like my friends” because they “tell me what to do.” The girls in the book club “were nice” and she did not “get bossed around”; they “didn’t say anything” when she made mistakes or “said wrong things.” Being able to be oneself was identified as a key aspect of being friends, not frenemies. The structure of the book club facilitated these relationships, in particular the fact that it was all-girls in a respectful environment (Polleck, 2010; Smith, 2000; Twomey, 2007).

Nonetheless, the concept of frenemies was alluring to the girls, as was getting revenge on those who bully you. Taylor’s favorite character was Nikki’s little sister, Brianna, because she “kicked MacKenzie,” demonstrating that she was not afraid of MacKenzie nor was she lured into idolizing her. Valuing Brianna’s violent response is an example of the revenge fantasies that the girls often expressed in relation to discussions of how they could respond to individuals similar to MacKenzie. This response also further demonstrates how the girls’ initially believed that the only way to stop their victimization was to become a bully themselves.

Revenge Fantasies

When asked how they would respond to MacKenzie’s bullying and intimidating behaviours, the girls spoke about the need to “fight fire with fire” (Aryton). Specifically, the girls focused on giving her a taste “of her own medicine”:

...ask some people who are getting teased by her a lot and instead of giving compliments... everyone's saying, “Oh, I like your shoes, I like your hair,”...so what you can say to MacKenzie is, “Got a new haircut,” and if she says “yes” or “no,” then you say, “It wasn't a compliment, it was a suggestion” (Madison).

Bridget continues, “After she starts feeling like us, we’d tell her, ‘How do you like that?’ That’s how you’ve been treating us.” Another solution suggested by Bridget was to:

Go over to MacKenzie and say, “Hey! Can I talk to you for a second?” And then say, “Close your eyes,” and make sure everybody's watching, and you walk her right into the boys’ change room and say, “Oh, MacKenzie, I’m so sorry,” and lock the door and make sure she can’t come out.

The girls equated standing up for oneself with putting others’ down, perceiving a direct relationship between meanness and popularity. None of the girls suggested befriending MacKenzie. While they acknowledged the unfairness of the popularity food chain, they nonetheless condoned the use of meanness in order to survive and possibly advance in the chain. One of the aspects of MacKenzie that they admired was her ability to be mean while retaining her popularity, obtaining what she wanted, and being secure in her own group. The revenge fantasies appeared to make the girls feel empowered in situations where they felt relatively powerless. Mirroring the ways in which the book represented characters as mean and powerful or nice and powerless (Taber & Woloshyn, 2011a), they choose to fantastically respond as the former over the latter; they would rather be characterized as a mean girl than a dork.

However, when asked if they thought their strategies would be effective in a real-life scenario, the girls acknowledged that they were not likely to actually engage in such behaviours, “because then you get in trouble because she’ll [a mean girl] blame it on you, and everybody believes her” (Bridget). The revenge fantasies appeared to be a first, perhaps knee-jerk, response

which became more reasoned with further discussion. For instance, in her exit interview, Bridget related an experience that had happened to her that day, where her parents called the school to address a bullying incident that helped resolve the situation. This juxtaposition of responses demonstrates the importance of providing space for discussion and critical analysis of the content of children's literature (Polleck, 2010; Trousdale, & McMillan, 2003).

In *Dork Diaries*, Nikki's grandmother tells her about the importance of choosing to "be a chicken or a champion" (241), regardless of the circumstances. When discussing these ideas, the girls initially defined being a champion as taking any sort of action against a mean girl, regardless of its appropriateness. Bridget explained, "A chicken is like somebody that isn't brave, and a champion is somebody that is brave." Her definition of a brave champion was originally someone who would "flip out of her head" in response to meanness. When asked in subsequent book club sessions if there was a way to be a champion without being mean, the girls described some specific strategies they could carry out, including avoiding mean girls, laughing off their bullying, making friends, standing up for others, being empathetic, and fostering confidence in oneself. For instance, in response to a possible dilemma the group was discussing about playing a prank on a new girl at school, Bridget responded that a champion would remember what it was like being a new girl, and should say to her friends, "I don't really think that's mature because I was the new girl before and so were you."

Perhaps the most insightful (and unsolicited) response to a chicken or champion dilemma was made by Taylor in the second last group session. The group was watching *Sydney White* (Robinson & Nussbaum, 2007), a movie about a working-class girl raised by her father who joins a university sorority of rich mean girls, eventually moving out to live with the "seven dorks" next door, who turn out to be her real friends. Taylor brings up the concept of chickens and champions in response to the final scene where Sydney gives a speech to run for Class President. All the dorks of the university (i.e., anyone who did not fit into a stereotypical rich, good-looking, popular group) support her, validating Sydney's decision not to quit and not to conform. Taylor then connects the plot to Nikki's decision at the end of *Dork Diaries* to leave her school in order to avoid embarrassment and the mean girls. She explains:

But I think for *Dork Diaries*, Nikki, at the end, I don't even think she was a champion because she was just gonna give up, and go to her old school.... She kind of was a chicken, but then it was kind of luck that made it all better.

As the book club progressed, the girls displayed understandings that revenge fantasies were fun, but not overly helpful. They concluded that, although often difficult, champions would advocate for themselves but not at the expense of others. This is where the girls began to deconstruct the meaning of "power," commencing to refute the idea, so prevalent in children's literature, that girls need to be mean in order to be assertive. Their responses to the book demonstrated a critical ability to connect *Dork Diaries* to their own lives and to the world in which they live.

Conclusion

The three main themes that emerged from our analysis of the data demonstrate the complex ways in which the girls negotiate their everyday lives. They quite astutely described hierarchies of popularity, friendship, and bullying that reveal an awareness of the ways in which power operates in schools. The in-depth nature of the book club case study format facilitated the reading of *Dork Diaries* as a springboard into discussion of the girls' lives. When asked during the initial interview to describe their life as a girl, the girls talked generally and with very little

detail about going to school and playing with friends; as the book club progressed, the discussions became more in-depth and nuanced. The structure of the book club enabled the researchers to build rapport with the girls and the girls, in turn, to build rapport with each other, thus creating a trusted space where they could share freely.

The book was used as a lens to explore the girls' lives, beginning from a distal, impersonal position moving into a more proximal personal one. For instance, when first directly asked whether they saw connection between their own lives and the book all the girls responded in the negative. However, in group discussions, they continually provided examples that linked the text to their lives (e.g., the school food chain). Gradually they seemed to come to understand that the context, plot, and characters in the book did illuminate their own lives, giving the group the opportunity to critique food chains, frenemies, and revenge fantasies. In each case, they first validated and then critiqued these aspects of their lives, moving away from an unquestioned acceptance of meanness in the food chain.

The *Dork Diaries* series has, as Smith (2000) describes in relation to the general genre of teen romance, a "formulaic structur[e] with [relatively] predictable solutions." It similarly "involves the careful attention to the style, color, and detail of female appearance and fashion" (p. 31). It is for this reason that it is so important to deconstruct books' content, so readers can actively engage with and critique it. Nikki and MacKenzie are very focused on appearance, perceiving that their looks will result in their popularity and success, mirroring social messages that girls and women receive, wherein "from cradle to grave, attractiveness correlates with desirable social outcomes" (Kwan, 2010, p. 146). For Nikki, true friendship ultimately trumps superficial frenemy friendship focused on appearance and popularity. However, this focus on friendship in the final pages of the book can easily be overshadowed by the book's message throughout that mean pretty girls always win. Furthermore, it continues to pathologize and malign "mean girls" as without any good qualities. The book club group fell into this trap as well, demonizing MacKenzie. Only with explicit prompts were the girls able to consider MacKenzie as a complex versus a simplistic antagonist. In the book, the mean girls' group is presented in ways similar to Gonick's (2004) discussion of popular understandings of mean girls in real life, "as almost cult-like organizations" (396), with MacKenzie's cult needing to be deconstructed here.

As we found in our research exploring the girls' interactions with *Dork Diaries*, "not only are differences between girls and the particular circumstances of their lives glossed over, but girls' layered and complex expressions of identity, power, and resistance are collapsed into certain ubiquitous meanings of girlhood with an ever expanding reach" (Gonick, 2004, p. 397). Girls are represented and understood as either unpopular, dorky, and working-class victims or as popular, pretty, and rich bullies (Taber & Woloshyn, 2011a). As Gonick (2006) explains, girls are often positioned "as simultaneously empowered and 'in crisis'" (p. 18) wherein "the[ir] future is thought to be securable only through creating and enhancing powerful identities acquirable by consuming the right products, having the right look, and resolving difficulties and problems by following the guidelines for self-improvement found in self-help books" (p. 19).

In short, success is attained by becoming MacKenzie, which is who three of the four girls in the book club wanted to be. In reflection, it is little surprise that they would choose a position of power as opposed to one without. Fortunately, we were able to begin to problematize these representations, exploring the social construction of girlhood, in reality and in fiction. We were successful in promoting girl empowerment, helping the girls discuss the gendered aspects of their lives which they may have previously taken for granted. While we do expect that they will

continue to struggle with food chains, frenemies, and revenge fantasies, we are hopeful that they will question them as opposed to taking them for granted.

The book club also had an unexpected and pleasant outcome for us as researchers. We were able to create strong bonds with the girls and they in turn, with each other. That the girls were involved in creating a secure space to be themselves, as girls who struggle with reading, was powerful for them, confirming the importance and need to create other such similar environments. Our research demonstrates the possibilities that are created by using a book club format, building on similar research/reading formats (Polleck, 2010; Smith, 2000; Twomey, 2007), for not only reading comprehension but critical literacy, with a focus on a gendered sociocultural critique.

In fact, each of the girls wanted to continue with the book club after the final session. While we initially had no intention of continuing with the book club, we were convinced to by the girls' enthusiasm, dedication, and commitment. We entered into a second phase of the research where we engaged in reading a more complicated book with larger social issues (*The Hunger Games* by Collins, 2008), providing the girls with even greater responsibility for reading and leading sessions. We thank Aryton, Bridget, Madison, and Taylor for working with us, sharing their lives, taking risks, and helping us learn about their experiences.

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