

**Creating *World Woman***  
***Leaders:* Missions, Mechanisms, and**  
**Experiences of Empowerment at the**  
**Seattle Girls' School**

**By Sarah Childers**  
**Advisor: Kathleen D. Noble**

**Women Studies Senior Thesis**  
**June 2003**

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Sarah Childers, June 2003

# Introduction

The capacity for single-sex schools to empower girls by facilitating the growth or maintenance of their resiliency and self-confidence during adolescence is a commonly cited benefit of single-sex education for girls. Given current research suggesting that adolescent girls experience co-educational schools as disempowering, the potential for single-sex education to empower girls is especially significant. Despite the steady increase in public interest in girls' schools since the early 1990s, vital knowledge is

missing from the public conversation regarding single-sex education for girls (Stabiner, 2002; Haag, 2002; Sadker & Sadker, 1994). This missing knowledge centers not on the quantitative output of single-sex institutions; assessments of the test scores and self-esteem indicators of girls who attend single-sex schools abound in the literature (Lee, 2001). Unfortunately, the absent knowledge is qualitative; girls' experiences in single sex schools, and more narrowly, girls' experiences of empowerment in single-sex schools are a glaring omission in the public's general knowledge of single-sex education.

Locally, an experiment in education is currently underway at the Seattle Girls' School (SGS). Established in the autumn of 2001, SGS is a secular, private middle school, comprised of an economically and racially diverse student body, characterized by an integrative curriculum focusing on math, science and technology, and finally, guided by a Mission Statement of student empowerment (Appendix A). The Seattle Girls' School is unique from its peers in many ways; any of the school's exceptional characteristics might be scrutinized to determine its effect on student experiences. I chose to focus on student experiences of empowerment at the Seattle Girls' School for three reasons. First and most importantly, I believe that empowerment of girls, the nurturing of resiliency and self-confidence to facilitate girls claiming and realizing their talents, must be central to all institutions, schools and otherwise, that serve girls. Second, because empowerment of girls was a primary purpose of the school's genesis and is central to the school's Mission Statement, I expected the theme of empowerment to inform all aspects of the school, from the most mundane to the most revolutionary and from the most spontaneous to the most planned. Third, I expected a highly visible theme of empowerment of girls to significantly shape student experiences. The Seattle Girls'

School aims to empower its students; and I believe it is important to investigate, through the paradigm of student voices and student experiences, whether SGS is realizing this ambitious goal.

A primary goal of this project is to share the experiences of the students at SGS with an audience beyond the SGS community. As is the case with community knowledge, students, parents, faculty, and staff members of SGS are privy to the experiential knowledge of students, and more importantly, in this community, the voices and experiences of girls are highly valued – this knowledge is solicited, it is taken seriously, and it is used to evaluate school policies and practices. Immersed in the SGS community, it is impossible not to see the benefits of this particular single-sex education. If a guest at SGS is able to investigate beyond the steady stream of verbal and physical energy emitted by the students, she or he will be overwhelmed with the strength and self-confidence of these girls. If a guest is willing and able to dig deeper, to talk with the girls, she or he will realize that the students of the Seattle Girls' School are, for the most part, anomalies. Current research suggests that during adolescence, many American girls experience a precipitous drop in self-esteem, are more concerned about boys and body images than science projects and activism, and, most frighteningly, gradually lose the resilience that protected and empowered them during childhood (Deak with Barker, 2001; Brown and Gilligan, 1992). Seattle Girls' School students do not fit the mold of the typical American adolescent girl; what makes SGS students different from their peers?

The difference between SGS students and their peers is so palpable that I noticed it immediately, before even knowing the context of SGS, and I noticed the difference not in a classroom but on a sports field. I first experienced in the spring of 2002 what I have

come to call *the Seattle Girls' School difference* when I was a referee for a youth lacrosse game between the Seattle Girls' School and another local middle school. I was struck by the confidence and sense of community embodied by these young athletes. While in many ways typical adolescents, the girls from the Seattle Girls' School seemed so different from their peers that the researcher in me could not help but wonder if the shared school experience of this diverse group of girls contributed to the shaping of the confident, reflective, and resilient girls I witnessed on the lacrosse field. Certainly, I thought, given the socializing power of school, the Seattle Girls' School must play a role in this difference. My interest in SGS runs from the personal, to the theoretical, to the practical. As a feminist and a future educator of middle school students I find particularly salient the capacity for schools to empower girls, and specifically, evidence suggesting that girls are more likely to experience single-sex as opposed to co-educational schools as empowering,

Research and discussions regarding the effects of single-sex education on girls has long served as a backdrop to public conversations of educational reform. However, recent policy proposals by the Bush Administration to relax Title IX to allow for public single sex programs and schools heightens the importance of determining empirically the benefits of single-sex education (Samuels and Annexstein, 2002; Sappenfield and McCarroll, 2002). Although the forthcoming changes in educational policy regarding Title IX and single-sex schools is not the primary focus of this research, it shapes the political context in which both my research and the Seattle Girls' School operate. An investigation of the ways in which empowerment operates within the Seattle Girls' School contributes valuable knowledge that may be drawn upon to shape education

policy and practice as well as to inform the established model of female education in the contexts of single-sex and co-educational schools.

## Literature Review

In order to contextualize a case study of the Seattle Girls' School, I will explore past research in three areas: adolescent girls and self-esteem; gender bias in co-educational schools; and single-sex education. It is worthwhile to note that while the population (adolescent girls), the location (single-sex schools), as well as the method (interviews) included in this study have been done numerous times over, most notably in work of Brown & Gilligan (1992) and Stabiner (2002), issues of empowerment are rarely



named, investigated, or discussed. Thus, while student empowerment is cited as a benefit of all girls' schooling, a coherent model for defining, locating, and analyzing empowerment in single sex education does not exist. Contributing to the construction of such a model is a primary goal of this research project.

## **Adolescent Girls and Self-Esteem**

Psychologists agree that adolescence is a trying time for all children. However, overall, girls experience a more profound drop in confidence, feelings of competency, and self-esteem than do boys during adolescence (Brown and Gilligan, 1992). This drop in self-esteem experienced by adolescent girls has been focused on to varying degrees in academic literature, popular literature, and the media over the past two decades. The overwhelming question posed by psychologists, educators, and journalists is: What happens to girls in adolescence to prompt a drop in confidence and self-esteem? Various hypotheses have been put forth. For the purpose of this research project, I am interested specifically in the implications of the drop in self-esteem and self-confidence during adolescence on the academic achievement and attitudes of girls.

Psychologist Carol Gilligan suggests that during adolescence, girls lose their voice; girls who were confident in childhood begin to feel unsure of their knowledge and actions, silencing their voices for fear of compromising relationships (Brown and Gilligan, 1992; Gilligan, 1993). A particularly disastrous manifestation of the self-silencing of voice is the silencing also of academic talents and abilities seen in even the most gifted of girls (Callahan and Reis, 1996). Psychologist Jacquelynne Eccles and colleagues argue that during adolescence gender roles become more pronounced,

adherence to gender roles is more strictly enforced, and the consequences for failing to act the prescribed part are more drastic (Eccles, Barber, Jozefowicz, Malenchuk, and Vida, 1999). After spending a year with two sets of California middle school students, journalist Peggy Orenstein suggests that girls' drop in self-esteem during adolescence is intricately linked to body image and relationships with boys (Orenstein, 1994).

Psychologist Joann Deak argues for taking a physiological approach to the decline in self-esteem among adolescent girls. Deak suggests that it is the combination of adolescent developmental changes and the transition from elementary schools, which tend to cater to girls' learning needs, to middle schools or junior highs, which are much less girl-friendly, that cause drops in self-esteem (Deak with Barker, 2002). Difficulties in determining the causes of drops in self-esteem partially stem from the difficulty of defining and measuring this abstract concept.

Self-esteem is most commonly measured through survey questions meant to determine an individual's perceived ability competence in a certain area (Eccles et al., 1999). Eccles and her colleagues measured the ability self-concepts of girls in various domains, including academics, sports, and social (Eccles et al., 1999). The results of Eccles' tests of ability self-concepts reveal that a drop in self-esteem amongst girls is not universal across domains. For example, girls often have high ability self-concepts in female-stereotypic domains such as reading, writing, and social relationships; however, girls tend to have especially low ability self-concepts in male-stereotypic domains such as science and technology (Eccles et al., 1999). A disastrous implication of this disparity of self-esteem is that those girls who succeed in male-stereotypic domains are not socially rewarded to the extent as are girls who succeed in female-stereotypic domains. Thus,

girls receive little social incentive to pursue activities and disciplines that lay beyond the problematic myth of American femininity. However, shunning male-stereotypic academic domains such as math and science severely limits girls' economic and academic options later in life (SGS, *Info*, 2002). Although girls' experiences during adolescence differ, it is important to note that simply being female is an added risk factor for experiencing low self-esteem during adolescence (Eccles et al., 1999).

Within the literature of self-esteem not all girls are equally represented. For example, the existing research largely focuses on white, middle class girls, ignoring or focusing only briefly on girls of color (Eccles et al., 1999). The limited research available regarding girls of color suggests that of all ethnicities, Latina adolescents experience the largest drop in self-esteem (Orenstein, 1994). African American girls, on the other hand, seem to have particularly high self-esteem; research suggests that they have more robust self-esteem than either African American boys or white girls (Eccles et al., 1999). This systematic bias in self-esteem literature toward the experiences of white girls must be addressed through more research on girls of color and self-esteem.

It is also worth noting that the very idea of self-esteem is culturally biased toward the White middle class American. In its most common definition self-esteem privileges the individual and ignores social factors, such as poverty or racism, that might cause a person be unhappy or to doubt her or his abilities. This critique of self-esteem contributes to my focus on the capacity of single sex education to empower, as opposed to its capacity to build self-esteem.

## **Gender Discrimination in Co-Educational Schools**

Schools are powerful socializing factors in the lives of young people, and thus have the potential to mitigate certain negative effects of adolescence. Research suggests that co-educational schools often contribute to the disempowerment of girls due to gender biased teaching practices, school atmospheres, and curriculum (American Association of University Women (AAUW), 1992; Sadker and Sadker, 1994). Sexual harassment is another form of gender discrimination facing many girls in co-educational schools. Although boys are also the victims of sexual harassment, the overwhelming majority of sexual harassment charges are brought by female students against male students (Stein, 1999). While gender bias in all forms can certainly exist in single sex schools, it is more likely that an all girls school will adopt what the American Association of University Women describe as a “feminist orientation,” and thus will strive to eliminate gender bias from its curriculum and school structures (AAUW, 1998). Reports such as *Shortchanging Girls, Shortchanging America* by the American Association of University Women and *Failing at Fairness, How Our Schools Cheat Girls* by American University Professors Myra and David Sadker (both released in the early 1990s) suggested that on aggregate, co-educational public schools disempowered girls. These reports catalyzed a movement in education reform to more fully address gender bias in public co-educational schools.

## **Girls and Single-Sex Schools**

Because of studies indicating that some girls experience single-sex schools more positively than they do co-educational schools, interest in single-sex education is increasing in the general public, with applications to all girls’ schools increasing by 30% over the last decade (SGS, *Info*, 2002). This renewed interest has spawned the creation of

new girls' schools, some of which, like the Seattle Girls' School, are revolutionary in form, ideology, and practice. Evidence regarding the benefits of single-sex education for girls is contentious. Methodological inconsistencies between studies, and the inherent difficulty of illuminating causal forces given confounding factors such as self-selection of students, make it difficult to pinpoint the relationship between single-sex education and benefits experienced by girls (Haag, 2002; AAUW, 1998). However, most researchers agree that increased feelings of competency and self-esteem (the cornerstones of empowerment), a more positive view of historically male academic domains such as science and technology, and high academic achievement are benefits girls often reap from a single-sex education (SGS, *FAQ*, 2002; Stabiner, 2002; Haag, 2002; Lee, 2002; Mann, 1994).

## **Defining Empowerment**

Depending on the discipline and the paradigm, empowerment has been theorized in various ways. Theories of power and empowerment are commonly discussed in the domain of political science, perhaps because of dominant culture's focus on 'power over' (as opposed to 'power to') models of power and empowerment. Feminist theorist bell hooks elegantly critiques the 'power over' model as limiting and oppressive even when it operates in revolutionary spaces, such as within feminist movements (hooks, 2000). Because the Seattle Girls' School community is comprised overwhelmingly by persons marginalized in mainstream American society and because of the social justice political position adopted by the school, a common 'power over' model of power and

empowerment would not be useful in investigating empowerment in the Seattle Girls' School. Instead, I seek a definition of empowerment that recognizes private and community manifestations of power and that takes into account the experiences and needs of individuals on the periphery of their society's power structure. I found this definition of empowerment in the small but growing body of knowledge on female talent development, a subsidiary discipline within psychology.

The concept of resiliency in the model of female talent development created by Noble, Subotnik, and Arnold (1999) is useful in defining 'empowerment' as it relates to girls and women. Their model of female talent development holds that resiliency is essential for a girl or woman to realize her talents in the face of social obstacles created by sexism, hetero-sexism, racism, and classism (Noble, Subotnik, and Arnold, 1999). Resiliency may be defined as "protective factors" that allow individuals to "respond to stress with competence" (Noble, Subotnik, and Arnold, 1999). While protective factors and obstacles will vary, a girl or woman who is resilient will have "a strong sense of self and a solid working knowledge of their values and needs" (Noble, Subotnik, and Arnold, 1999). Psychologist Barbara Kerr refers to the protective mechanisms developed by resilient girls as "shells and thorns" (Kerr, 1994). The foundations for resilience may be laid by numerous sources, including schools. Given this knowledge, a reframing of my fundamental question of this research project becomes: How does the Seattle Girls' School contribute to the resiliency of its students? Thus, for the purpose of this research project, the concept of empowerment may be best conceived in terms of building resiliency as defined by Noble, Subotnik, and Arnold's model of female talent development

# Research Questions

I wanted to better understand the ways in which empowerment operates in the Mission Statement, structures, and student experiences at the Seattle Girls' School. Specifically, it is the translation of empowerment – from guiding Mission Statements to mechanisms of transference both concrete and intangible and finally to student experiences – that I find most significant. My research is guided by three questions, each of which is displayed in bold in the text below.

Although the Seattle Girls' School Mission makes explicit what it will empower its students *to do*, the more fundamental question of whom the Seattle Girls School will

empower its students *to be* is unarticulated in the Mission Statement (SGS, *Info*, 2002). I assume that the Seattle Girls' School is guided by a particular vision of what students are empowered to become. Thus, in order to access this vision my first research question is:

**What type of women are Seattle Girls' School students empowered to become?**

Based on the ideology of the Seattle Girls School creators and administrators, I would expect this vision to shape all formal structural components of the Seattle Girls School, from curriculum to special programs to extracurricular activities. Informal components, such as teacher/student relationships and school atmosphere, must as well be guided by this vision. Because these formal and informal components of the Seattle Girls School are intended to empower students I will identify them as formal and informal mechanisms of empowerment. Thus, my second research question is: **How are Seattle Girls' School students empowered via formal and informal mechanisms?**

Finally, a localized focus on student experiences of empowerment is missing from the current discussion of adolescent girls in single-sex schools. My research is guided by the assumption that this is a crucial piece of information, and that it may be best obtained through a case study focusing on the voices most often silenced or ignored – those of adolescent girls. Thus, my third research question is: **How do students experience the Seattle Girls' School mission and mechanisms of empowerment?**



# **Methods**

## **About the Seattle Girls' School**

In many ways an investigation of the Seattle Girls' School with a focus on student empowerment is a journey into uncharted territory. It is difficult to apply the literature on single-sex education to a case study of SGS because my research differs vastly from that which came before in terms of sample, methods, and theme.

First, with the notable exception of The Young Women's Leadership Academy documented in the work of Karen Stabiner (2002), most investigations of all girls schools have focused on prestigious, religious (often Catholic), high schools (Haag, 2002). The Seattle Girls' School is neither religious nor a high school, nor, at this moment, typically defined as prestigious.

Second, the majority of past studies focus on quantitative measures, such as indicators of self-esteem according to survey answers or achievement based on an analysis of grades and test scores, to assess whether students experience single-sex education positively. The work of Mikel Brown & Carol Gilligan at the Emma Willard School (Brown and Gilligan, 1992) and Karen Stabiner at The Young Women's Leadership Academy and Marlborough School (Stabiner, 2002) are exceptions. However, although both Brown & Gilligan and Stabiner paid attention to student voice through the use of interviews, neither study investigated the subject or the subjects of this investigation. Brown & Gilligan focused their study around the moral development and relationships of adolescent girls, and Stabiner's work is a largely unfocused ethnography of an academic year at two very different girls' schools.

Third, although the student body of The Young Women's Leadership Academy is composed entirely of poor, urban, girls of color, the student populations at the Emma Willard School and Marlborough School are predominantly middle to upper class, suburban white girls. Fourth and finally, with the exception of Brown and Gilligan's work at the Emma Willard School, middle school students are rarely the primary subjects in investigations of single-sex schools. Thus, a case study of the Seattle Girls' School produces new, localized knowledge of the ways in which empowerment operates in a particular model of all girls schooling.

The Seattle Girls' School is unique among its peers because it is governed by a Mission Statement emphasizing empowerment of students:

To empower middle school girls to think critically and seek creative solutions to real world problems in a challenging academic environment that highlights math, science and technology, embraces diversity and promotes collaboration, integrated learning, and respect for all (SGS, *Info*, 2002).

The infrastructure of the SGS Mission Statement was developed by the founders of SGS, a group of Seattle community members motivated to start an all girls' middle school by reports such as the Sadker's groundbreaking work *Failing at Fairness: How Schools Cheat Girls* (Sadker & Sadker, 1994) and the American Association of University Women's 1991 report *Shortchanging Girls, Shortchanging America* (AAUW, 1991). Founding Head of School Marja Brandon left the initial Mission Statement intact save for adding the 'integrated learning' component. Integrated learning and current brain research that supports this pedagogy is particularly salient to Ms. Brandon. Ms. Brandon credits multiple social justice movements, including civil rights movements and feminist movements, for contributing to the founding and to the continued growth and direction of SGS.

The Seattle Girls' School admitted its first class of 31 sixth grade students in the fall of 2001. In the fall of 2002, SGS expanded to accommodate sixth and seventh grade classes; SGS plans to eventually serve 288 students in grades 5-8 (SGS, *FAQ*, 2002). The school is a secular private school, funded in part by grants from various local foundations and community members. The Seattle Girls' School's curriculum is characterized by integrative learning and a focus on math, science and technology. Integrative learning is defined by SGS as

An approach to learning that cuts across disciplines, providing a process for developing skills and abilities required in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It views learning and teaching in a holistic way and reflects the real world, which is interactive. It places emphasis on projects and employs sources beyond textbooks. A body of brain research supports the notion that learning is best accomplished when information is presented in meaningful, connected patterns (SGS, *FAQ*, 2002).

The curricular focus on math, science, and technology at SGS stems from a commitment to addressing the under-representation of women in math and science disciplines in high school and college and in the growing technical fields of the economy (SGS, *FAQ*, 2002). The Seattle Girls' School is also motivated by current research that suggests that confidence, for girls, is the variable most strongly correlated with achievement in math. The Seattle Girls' School seeks to create an environment where girls can realize their abilities in math and science – disciplines girls tend to shy away from beginning in high school (SGS, *Info*, 2002; Sadker & Sadker, 1994).

In hopes of increasing interaction between SGS students and the broader Seattle community, SGS has established internship and mentorship programs. Students are assigned to an internship site every six weeks where they participate in activities such as: digital and still photography; law and mock trial; and sound engineering (SGS, *Info*, 2002). Beginning in the fall of 2002, SGS students were given the option to enter into a mentoring relationship with a woman in the larger Seattle community. The majority of current SGS students have opted to have a mentor.

## Participants

Participants were all students and full-time faculty and staff members of the Seattle Girls' School during the 2002-2003 school year. The Seattle Girls' School is comprised of 72 students spread between the sixth and seventh grades, six full time teachers, four full-time staff members, and many other part-time employees and community volunteers. The staff is comprised of both men and women, and both the staff and student body consists of 50% people of color (SGS, *Info*, 2002). Although the Seattle

Girls' School is a private school (tuition and fees run upwards of \$11,000 annually), the student body is economically diverse, with 44% of students receiving needs-based financial aid (SGS, *Info*, 2002). Marja Brandon is the founding and acting Head of School.

## **Data Collection**

Data collection took place during the week of March 24 – 28, 2003. It consisted of on-site observations, an individual interview with Marja Brandon, and group interviews with students. In order to acclimate myself to the structure and atmosphere of the Seattle Girls' School, I observed activities during four consecutive school days (Monday 3/24 – Thursday 3/27) of the same week. Activities included morning community meetings, class time, and free time. Observations and interviews were conducted simultaneously. I strove to observe activities that are conducted frequently, such as lessons presented during class, as well as more infrequent, atypical activities, such as the Culminating Events that take place once each term. Students' experiences are shaped by extraordinary activities just as much as typical activities, and thus, I paid equal attention to all activities, regardless of frequency during a typical school day.

In the classroom, I observed closely curriculum, classroom management techniques and teaching styles. I also took note of student interaction with curriculum material, student reaction to classroom management techniques and teaching styles, student/teacher interaction, and students' interaction with each other during class time and free time. No names or any distinguishing characteristics of students or teachers were recorded in order to protect confidentiality and retain anonymity.

The bulk of the data were collected through interviews. I conducted an hour-long interview with Marja Brandon, Head of the Seattle Girls' School, and three student group interviews. Seventeen girls participated in student interviews; five seventh grade students and twelve sixth grade students, respectively. Student group interviews were conducted before school and during lunch and lasted approximately thirty minutes each.

Ms. Brandon facilitated the recruitment of students. Recruitment took place in several stages. I spoke at a student-led community meeting two weeks before my research began, and I addressed the Seattle Girls' School Parents Association at its monthly meeting the following week. Below is a summary of the recruitment speech I made to parents of Seattle Girls' School students.

Hello, my name is Sarah Childers. I am an undergraduate student at the University of Washington in the Women Studies Department. For my senior thesis I am doing research at the Seattle Girls' School. I want to interview students in order to better understand how they experience the Seattle Girls' School's unique mission and structures. Student interviews will last approximately 30 minutes each and will be held at the Seattle Girls' School before school and during lunch during the week of March 24 – 28, 2003. The interview is confidential. If you would like to give your daughter permission to participate in an interview, please sign and return the Parental Interview Consent Form. Your daughter then will then sign a Student Interview Consent Form if she chooses to participate. Thank you!

Copies of all recruitment speeches are included in Appendix B.

Interviews were guided by prepared questions. Although questions varied depending on audience, all questions were designed to assess students' experiences within school structures. The concept of empowerment is difficult to discuss with adolescent girls, especially when trying to access aspects of their experiences that they might not have thought about critically. I argue not that adolescents are incapable of reflection nor that they do not recognize when they are empowered. Instead, I argue that 'empowerment' as an abstract concept and if expressed in theoretical, academic language

will not be meaningful to the majority of adolescent girls. I took this limitation into account when designing guiding questions for the student group interview. Complete sets of interview questions are included at the end of this section and in appendices C-D.

All participants signed consent/assent forms. In order for students to take part in a group interview, parental permission in the form of a signed consent form was necessary. Once parental approval had been granted, students signed an assent form. Participation was voluntary and personal information was kept confidential, except in the special case of Ms. Brandon whose public prominence makes her easily identifiable. Interview consent/assent forms are included in Appendices E-G. All interviews were audio-taped and transcribed by me.

## **Interview Questions**

### **Interview Questions for Marja Brandon, SGS Head of School**

1. What vision shaped the conception of the Seattle Girl School? Does this same vision continue to influence the growth and structure of the school?
2. If so, tell me about this vision. Where does it come from? How prominently does it shape administrative policies, school structure, relationships, school atmosphere, etc?
3. How apparent is this vision in day to day life at the Seattle Girls School?
4. Is the staff consciously aware of this vision? How are they made aware?
5. Are the students aware of this vision? How are they made aware?

6. The SGS mission statement is very explicit about what the school strives to empower its students *to do*. What or whom does SGS empower its students *to be*?
7. From your literature it seems that there are four formal mechanisms of empowerment at the Seattle Girls School. I've identified these mechanisms as: Integrated curriculum; curricular focus on math, science, and technology; special programs like mentorships and internships; and extra curricular activities. Do these mechanisms further your vision and facilitate empowerment of your students? If so, how?
8. Are there informal mechanisms that support your vision and empower students?
9. What do you think is the most empowering aspect of the Seattle Girls School, in terms of empowering "to do" and empowering "to be"?
10. Is the Seattle Girls School a transformative experience for students?
11. If so, in what ways do you facilitate this transformation?
12. Would you characterize Seattle Girls School students as gifted or talented? Why or why not?
13. What is your vision for the future of the Seattle Girls School?
14. Is there anything else that you think I should know about the Seattle Girls School?

## **Interview Questions for SGS Students**

1. How long have you been a student at the Seattle Girls School?
2. Why are you a student at the Seattle Girls School?
3. How would you describe the Seattle Girls' School to a friend who doesn't go to school here?
4. How do you experience all of the unique aspects of the Seattle Girls School?
5. What is your favorite part of the Seattle Girls School? Why?
6. Is there anything about the Seattle Girls School that you don't enjoy? Why?
7. Would you characterize yourself as talented or gifted? Why or why not.



8. Have you changed since you became a Seattle Girls School student? In what ways?
9. Do you think the Seattle Girls School has contributed to this change? In what ways?
10. Are you aware of the Seattle Girls School Mission Statement? If so, how are you made aware?
11. What sort of woman do you think Marja, your teachers, and the Seattle Girls School staff want you to grow up to be?
12. How do you know this?
13. What sort of woman do you want to grow up to be? Why?
14. Is there anything else that you think I should know about the Seattle Girls School?

## **Feminist Methodology**

In all aspects of this investigation I strove to practice feminist methodology. Definitions of feminist methodology vary; I have relied upon the model of feminist methodology described by Caroline Ramazanoglu and Janet Holland in *Feminist Methodology: Challenges and Choices* (Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002). This model cites three distinguishing characteristics of feminist methodology and the feminist researcher: First, a focus on some level of the investigation with issues of gender and gender relations, often through the use of feminist theory; second, the use of a normative

framework with the goal of social transformation; and third, a reflective stance taken by a feminist researcher regarding her own power, subjectivity, and accountability (Ramazanoglu with Holland, 2002). Because the larger goal of my investigation is to produce knowledge that contributes to educational reform for the benefit of adolescent girls, and because feminist theory and research, predominantly theory produced from investigations of the girls' experiences in various schools, shapes my research at all levels, my research project can be considered feminist.

In order to truly embrace feminist methodology and to truly act as a feminist researcher, I must make known my bias and my motivations. My particular bias in this research comes from personal experiences with students from the Seattle Girls' School. I have previously mentioned that the impetus for my research project was an interaction I had with a group of Seattle Girls' School students – the 2002 lacrosse team. I fell in love with these confident and caring girls, and I immediately wondered what caused the difference in attitude, self-perception, and peer interactions that I noticed between the Seattle Girls' School students and other adolescent girls. Thus began my quest to determine the cause of what I call *the Seattle Girls' School difference*. As I learn more about the school and as my interactions with members of the Seattle Girls' School community increase, the more fascinated and enamored I am with this institution. I firmly believe that the Seattle Girls School benefits its students beyond the usual educational and social benefits one would expect from schools, and the aim of my investigation was to determine if empowerment is an aspect of these benefits. I am not a neutral researcher by any means; it is my burden as a feminist research to make this bias transparent.

## Data Analysis

First, I made notes during my observations at the Seattle Girls' School (March 24 – 27, 2003). Although the experiences and opinions of the members of the SGS community expressed in interviews served as the primary data source for this investigation, my observations at SGS have shaped my understanding of the ways in which empowerment operates at the school. Thus, my observation notes are used primarily to give personal examples to themes articulated in interviews by SGS students and Head of School Marja Brandon.

Second, I transcribed audio-taped interviews with Ms. Brandon and with three groups of SGS students. Audio-tapes from Student Group Interviews were coded according to interview population; question answered; voice; and general theme of answer. Interview population refers to the grade level of the participants. Student Group Interview I comprised five seventh grade students and one sixth grade student. Student Group Interviews II and III comprised sixth graders entirely. Student Group Interviews were also coded according to change in voice of interview participants. The interview with Ms. Brandon was coded according to question answered and theme of answer. The most important elements in each transcription were themes of responses to interview questions. I organized themes according to the following model: first, according to the interview question that elicited the response and illuminated the theme; second, according to which of the three guiding research questions the theme related; and third, according to relationships between the themes that emerged in each interview, where relationship was defined as consensus or agreement among and between interview populations.

# Results

My guiding research questions were intended to illuminate three facets of the Seattle Girls' School in regard to student empowerment: first, the school's vision of the woman students are empowered to become; second, the mechanisms of empowerment that stem from this vision; and third, student experiences of empowerment. The results from an interview with Marja Brandon, SGS Head of School, and three group interviews

of SGS students are organized by guiding research question. Interview questions are represented in italics.

## **Research Question I: What type of women are Seattle Girls' School students empowered to become?**

To determine the vision of the empowered woman underlying the school's Mission Statement I posed the following question to Marja Brandon, Head of the Seattle Girls' School: *The SGS Mission Statement is very explicit about what the school strives to empower its students to do. What or whom does SGS empower its students to be?* Ms. Brandon answered that SGS students are empowered to become *World Women Leaders*. *What are the characteristics of a World Woman Leader?* According to Ms. Brandon a *World Woman Leader* thinks critically about her rights and responsibilities in her various communities, is confident, and takes healthy, appropriate risks. Ms. Brandon notes that a *World Woman Leader* is not always popular because she is an activist. (Ms. Brandon distinguishes between thinking and talking about activism and actually being an activist through taking part in the difficult work of altering reality through activism.) Finally, a *World Woman Leader* has the inner strength and the resilience to take an unpopular stance on an issue and to speak up for herself and her ideas. Ms. Brandon acknowledges that not all SGS students will embrace the vision of the *World Woman Leader*:

We are creating *World Woman Leaders* here at SGS; I honestly believe this. I know that not all girls will choose to become *World Woman Leaders*, and that's OK. The road is bumpy for empowered girls and woman; we are honest about the obstacles *World Women Leaders* face. But I think many of them will choose to be leaders, and this gives me hope.

Students are able to identify the SGS ideal of the empowered woman. When asked, *What type of woman do Marja and your teachers want you to grow up to become?*, participants in all student interviews answered, often in unison, “A *World Woman Leader*”. Although details varied, students described the fundamental characteristics of a *World Woman Leader* using language similar to the description articulated by Ms. Brandon. Students described a *World Woman Leader* as a woman who is a critical thinker and an informed decision maker. One student used imagery of color shades to represent levels of understanding in her description of a *World Woman Leader*:

They (*World Woman Leaders*) are deep thinkers. They (SGS faculty and staff) want us to see shades of gray not just black and white of important issues. A lot of children just see black and white, and we don’t see any shades. A *World Woman Leader* sees the shades of gray.

A *World Woman Leader* as described by students is confident enough to pursue her dreams, even if formidable obstacles stand in her way. A student described these obstacles primarily taking the form of sexism. She noted that “people will always say ‘you can’t do this or that because you are a woman’ but she (a *World Woman Leader*) won’t let barriers stand in her way.” The most prevalent description of a *World Woman Leader* voiced in the student interviews was ‘activist’. Students made a similar distinction between a person who thinks about activism and a person who participates in activism. A *World Woman Leader*, as conceptualized by SGS, is described by students as an activist who “doesn’t sit on the sidelines” and “who changes the world”.

Students’ descriptions of the SGS vision varied according to two factors: first, with regard to how flexible student’s viewed SGS vision; and second, with regard to how

strong students viewed the obligation to embrace the SGS vision. Participants in Student Group Interview I were more likely to describe the SGS vision of the *World Woman Leader* as narrow and inflexible. Students in Interview I reported that the faculty and staff of SGS expected all students to become famous political activists who changed the world in big ways, even if this is not what students want to do. One student explained:

Not everyone wants to be a famous person that everyone has heard of. It's a good goal if that's what you want, but they (SGS faculty and staff) just expect all of us to be activists and leaders.

Participants in Student Group Interviews II and III were more likely to say that SGS defined the *World Woman Leader* in broad terms and that the vision was flexible and accommodating. One student noted:

I think that they (SGS faculty and staff) want us to become women who don't necessarily have to know what they want but who have an internal grounding toward activism and things that are happening in society. They want us to be aware and they want us to take steps toward action even if we don't get a job that makes us rich or are known as *World Women Leaders*.

This cleavage in student views of the SGS vision of *World Woman Leaders* and of expectations that students will realize this ideal seems to correspond with students' grade level. Seventh-grade students (who comprised the majority of the population of Interview I) tended to view the ideal as narrow and the expectation as strict, and sixth-grade students (who comprised the entirety of the population of Interviews II and III) tended to view the ideal more broadly and the expectation as flexible. Nuances of this differences are further explored in the Discussion.

## **Research Question II: How are Seattle Girls' School students empowered via formal and informal mechanisms?**

How are Seattle Girls' School students empowered to become future *World Woman Leaders*? In what ways does SGS facilitate the maintenance and strengthening of girls' resiliency and self-confidence? In order to answer these questions I asked Ms. Brandon to comment upon mechanisms of empowerment within the Seattle Girls' School. I classified mechanisms as either formal or informal. Although this binary categorization is problematic for its simplicity, it does afford an opportunity to recognize the various sources of student empowerment at SGS. I identified and classified mechanisms according to SGS literature (*Information Packet*, 2002; *Frequently Asked Questions*, 2002), observations at SGS, and my interview with Marja Brandon, SGS Head of School. Formal mechanisms are those structures of the school easily identified by people outside of the SGS community and include the school's most prominent characteristics: all girls middle school; integrative math, science, and technology curriculum; and special community-centered programs. More subtle are informal mechanisms which are visible upon entering into the SGS community and include: relationships between and among students, faculty, and staff; and school culture.

### **Formal Mechanisms**

Formal mechanisms for student empowerment at SGS include: all female environment; curriculum; and special programs. It is clear from SGS literature and from my interview with Marja Brandon that the formal structures of SGS were purposefully designed to empower girls to take risks, to increase their self-confidence, and to bolster



their resiliency in the face of future obstacles. According to Ms. Brandon, the facilitation of ‘positive risk taking’ in academic, social, and physical domains stems directly from the SGS Mission Statement of student empowerment and is key to developing *World Women Leaders*. Ms Brandon reports that positive risk taking is encouraged at SGS because “failure isn’t as scary here as it is elsewhere; we don’t take the scariness out of things or lower our expectations, but we do act as a safety net so that girls can take risks and try new things.”

To the question *Why a girls’ school?* Ms. Brandon cites evidence that single sex schooling benefits girls as it boosts their self-confidence, discourages disidentification with academic domains identified as ‘male’ (math and science predominantly), and facilitates increased academic achievement and personal growth. To the question *Why middle school?* Ms. Brandon answers:

Middle school is the forgotten age group. Kids are naturally turning from parent to peer to influence decision making. We know that if kids, especially girls, are not supported during this time, they will engage in unhealthy activities in 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grades. The way middle school is organized now is terrible for girls, not only because of the structure of schools (compartmentalized curriculum and discouragement of parental involvement), but because of sexism in society. Take the typical problems of adolescence and for girls magnify it by the impacts of sexism – loss of formal power, focus on body image. It is essential for schools to support girls during this time.

Thus, the overlying organization of SGS as a girls’ middle school is meant to act as the scaffolding for an empowering space for girls.

The curriculum at SGS is also meant to empower girls. Seattle Girls’ School curriculum is integrative; hands-on and project-based; informed by the most current brain research on learning; underlined by a focus on math, science and technology; reliant on primary sources; and created by SGS faculty in hopes of eliminating bias. Taken

together, the SGS curriculum is empowering because it encourages critical thinking, problem-solving, and group work that increases students' confidence in their intellectual, academic, and social abilities. Culminating Events, held three times a year at the end of each unit, are an especially empowering aspect of the SGS curriculum. Culminating Events involve all members of the SGS community, and invite participation from members of the larger Seattle community. During Culminating Events students present multiple projects, individually and in groups. A sixth-grade Culminating Event that I observed in March of 2003 involved mock medical board exams administered to students by local physicians; presentations of student-created interactive computer programs; and showcasing of students' original poetry. Ms. Brandon reports that Culminating Events, which take place three times a year, are invaluable to building students' confidence, especially confidence in public speaking.

The curricular focus on math, science, and technology at SGS is a purposeful reaction to the well-documented trend of girls disidentifying with the subjects of math and science beginning in middle school and the implications of this trend. To the question *Why math, science, and technology?* Ms. Brandon answers:

These fields are the fastest growing fields in our economy and historically women have not participated to the same degree as have men. We also see today a leveling off of women in these fields. Girls tend to distance themselves from the subjects of math and science beginning in middle school. Overall, they don't take Advanced Placement courses in these subjects (in high school); they don't major in these subjects (in college); and they aren't able to pursue careers in the related fields. We want to encourage girls to go into these fields.

The focus of SGS curriculum is meant to increase girls' specific confidence in the domains of math, science, and technology, and thus to eventually increase women's

participation in the most male-stereotypical, and often the most prestigious and economically lucrative academic domains and career paths in our society.

Many programs exist at SGS that are designed to connect the school to the larger Seattle community. Two programs that are especially unique in middle schools are SGS's internship and mentorship programs. Both programs are meant to support girls in making community connections and to increase girls' self-confidence and feelings of efficacy through experiences. Through the internship program students work at various Seattle organizations, including companies, volunteer organizations, and public institutions. Ms. Brandon reports that internships are meant to "open girls' eyes to all the possible passions and careers that they can choose, and to try new things." The SGS mentorship program facilitates relationships between SGS students and Seattle women who volunteer their time to act as role models. Ms. Brandon reports that the Mentorship program is meant to give girls another supportive person in their lives, and to encourage positive relationships between students and female role models, thus contributing to girls' resilience.

## **Informal Mechanisms**

Informal mechanisms of student empowerment are not easily recognizable structures; neither are they codified in the School's Mission Statement. However, informal mechanisms, including relationships between and among SGS community members and school atmosphere, stem directly from the SGS Mission Statement and seem to permeate all levels of interaction at SGS. Ms. Brandon argues that if an organization's Mission Statement is good, if it is embraced by all persons that it governs, and if it is continually revisited, the Mission Statement will resonate in all levels of the

organization – “not just in the flesh but in the bones”. Thus, the SGS Mission Statement of student empowerment is designed to be an evident and guiding force in the building of relationships and in the formation of school culture at SGS.

Relationships between faculty/staff and students at SGS are meant to be empowering to all participants. Relationships at the Seattle Girls’ School are based on respect, trust, and care and are facilitated by constant dialogue. Ms. Brandon notes that “we (faculty and staff) care about them (students), we trust them, we believe in them, and they know this.” Relationships are also shaped by the high expectations laid out by the school’s anti-bias Mission Statement. Students and teachers at SGS constantly strive to create a space that is free from bias and to celebrate diversity in all its different forms. Ms. Brandon says that this difficult process of confronting bias is undertaken primarily through dialogue within the Seattle Girls’ School Community.

We have conversations here that a lot of my peers would walk away from because they are uncomfortable. SGS students are more comfortable having these difficult conversations about race and bias.

These conversations often occur at the twice-weekly all school community meetings, which are student-led. Ms. Brandon observes that students are empowered to discuss issues and to critique the school during these meetings; however, students are encouraged to address issues regarding the SGS community in multiple forums, including individually with Ms. Brandon in her office during a break in the school day, perhaps over a snack of M&Ms. Ms. Brandon notes that “students are constantly in my office telling me what they think should change, and if anything, I’m accused of listening to students too much!” Ms. Brandon describes SGS as “student-centered”, which shapes school culture and relationships in ways that are empowering to students.

The combination of formal and informal mechanisms of empowerment at SGS creates a “positive transformative experience for girls,” according to Ms. Brandon. Empowerment is visible in students’ increased confidence in general and in increased domain-specific confidence, such as science or public speaking. This transformation is evident to parents, teachers, and to Ms. Brandon early on in the school year. Ms. Brandon reports that “Parents notice a difference in their daughters as early as November, we notice it earlier, and the students notice differences in themselves.” Clearly, the Seattle Girls’ School is designed to empower students; the question that remains to be answered is: Do the experiences of students reflect the intentions of the school; do students experience SGS as empowering? To address these questions I turned to the voices and experiences of SGS students.

### **Research Question III: How do students experience the Seattle Girls’ School mission and mechanisms of empowerment?**

In order to access student experiences of empowerment at SGS, participants in student group interviews were asked to comment upon their time at SGS. I asked students to tell me how they describe SGS to friends outside the SGS community; to tell me about the unique aspects of SGS; to share with me the type of woman they want to become; and finally, I asked students to tell me about their personal transformations since becoming an SGS student and to comment upon the role played by SGS in this transformation. I will first address how students experience the SGS Mission Statement, including how students experience the SGS ideal of the *World Woman Leader*. Second, I will address how

students experience SGS formal and informal mechanisms of empowerment. Finally, I will share girls' stories of transformation.

## **Student Experiences: The SGS Mission Statement and Future Selves**

The majority of participants in Student Group Interviews were familiar with the main points of the SGS Mission Statement. Several students had the mission statement memorized. All students were familiar with the physical location of the Mission Statement in the school. "Our Mission Statement is hanging above the drinking fountain in the hall, they (SGS faculty and staff) want us to read it all the time so we know it," reported one student. Although many students expressed that SGS is doing an admirable job of following its Mission Statement, some students articulated that they wish that the school would spend more energy fulfilling some of the more difficult mandates of the Mission Statement, for example, creating a space free of bias. Students are aware of the subtext of the Mission Statement: that they are being empowered to become *World Women Leaders* in line with the school's vision. I sought to access students' personal visions of the empowered woman by asking them to describe the type of woman they wanted to become. The extent to which students have internalized the SGS vision of *The World Woman Leader* is at least partially apparent in their articulations of the women they want to grow up to become.

Although students' visions of their future selves were as individual as the girls themselves, visions may be categorized according to general characteristics. I will refer to the two most prominent visions expressed by girls as *Professionals* and *Activists*.

Although *Professionals* and *Activists* share many attributes, for example both are described as intelligent and informed critical thinkers, the archetypes differ in important ways. For example, students who identified themselves as future *Professionals* were more likely to describe themselves as becoming famous, and students who identified themselves as future *Activists* were more likely to describe themselves as becoming leaders. Girls who embraced ideal of *Professionals* envisioned themselves most often as doctors and/or scientists. Specific careers were not as often pinpointed by students who embraced the ideal of *Activist*; instead, these students saw themselves doing work with various causes, the most common of which were: the environment; the state of third world nations; and political mobilizing against war and racism. Girls identifying as future *Activists* also tended to view themselves as facing and overcoming obstacles, many of which were described as rooted in sexism. One student argued passionately:

I want to be someone who revolutionizes what people think of as what women can do and what they can't do. I want to do something that they tell me that I can't do, that they tell me is impossible. I want to do something like that because that way they will realize that they put a barrier there, but it is not going to stop me or any of us. They will say "you can't do this because you're a woman" or "you can't do this because you don't think this way". I want to smash that barrier to show them that no matter what barrier they put up, it won't work.

Students' recognition of future obstacles and their assertions that they will conquer these obstacles suggests that SGS contributes to students' resilience.

Two students envisioned themselves as becoming both *Professionals* and *Activists*; these students recognized that they would need to strike a balance between the ideals. One student said:

I want to be an activist who leads rallies and marches and who works to stop wars, but I also want to become an engineer. I know I'll need to find a balance in my life.

Four students (all seventh-grade students and participants in Interview I) did not articulate a guiding archetype for the type of woman they wanted to become. When I pressed these students to offer any characteristic of their future self and not necessarily an entire picture, two students responded that they wanted to be nice; the other two students insisted that they “had no idea what they wanted to be like”.

Although no student specifically identified the *World Woman Leader* as the type of woman she wanted to become, in the majority of cases, visions of future selves expressed by SGS students paralleled in important ways the SGS vision of *World Woman Leader*. For example, many students used similar adjectives to describe their future selves as they used to describe *World Women Leaders*. These adjectives include: informed; critical thinker; activist; involved; and confident. Relationships between student and school visions of future selves are addressed in the Discussion.

## **Student Experiences: Formal and Informal Mechanisms of Empowerment**

In order to access student experiences with SGS mechanisms of empowerment, I asked students participating in Student Group Interviews to describe the school and its unique characteristics and also to comment upon why they decided to attend SGS. From these conversations I was able to determine how students experience formal and informal mechanisms of empowerment at the Seattle Girls School.

A majority of students identified formal mechanisms as both the most unique and the most enjoyable aspect of SGS. Overwhelmingly, students recognized that their school experience is very different than the schooling experiences of their non-SGS peers. Also,



SGS students were thankful for what many of them described as the “opportunities” available at SGS.

Many students cited the ‘all girls’ aspect of SGS as contributing positively to their educational experience. SGS students described boys as “annoying and distracting” and as monopolizing teachers’ attention. One student observed

At my old school the boys were always screwing around and the teachers were always paying attention to them, trying to get us back on track. And when I had a question, it was always an “I’ll get to you later” type of thing. I thought that here would be a lot easier for me, and I was right.

Girls also cited the absence of boys as increasing confidence to speak up and to take more risks. According to one student, because of the absence of boys at SGS “we don’t feel pressured to do something exactly right; we can mess up until we get it right without feeling stupid.” Some students expressed that the all girls environment was more comfortable and interesting. One student said noted that at SGS “we can express ourselves more, we have more confidence, and it’s a little bit cool to not have boys here because talk about stuff that’s important to girls.” Another student observed a difference in what it means to be a “cool girls” at SGS and in a typical co-educational school. She says, “It’s cool to advance in science, math and technology here whereas in most schools girls are only cool if they’re too centered around boys and how they look and their popularity.” SGS students are split about whether they want to attend a single-sex or co-educational high school; some “don’t ever want to go to school with boys again” although others “miss hanging out and being friends with boys.”

Students expressed positive experiences with the curriculum at SGS. Students described the curriculum as fun (“like a big game all day” said one student), interesting

because of the integrative aspect, contributing to confidence because of the focus on math and science and the prominence of group work on projects, and because of Culminating Events (“I feel such a huge sense of accomplishment when it’s over,” said one student). Many students felt that they were receiving a better education than their peers at other schools because of differences in curriculum.

Students often identified internships as one of the most unique and most enjoyable aspects of SGS. Internships were described as “great opportunities” and as “really fun and interesting”. Students recognized that internships were ways to connect them with “other communities and with different jobs and activities that we might like to do someday”. Some students shared their appreciation for their mentors, but overall, internships were mentioned more often as unique and fun special programs.

Informal mechanisms of empowerment were also identified by students as contributing positively to their experience at the Seattle Girls’ School. Students appreciated their relationships with SGS faculty and staff. One student shared that “here teachers aren’t trying to trick us; they’re trying to help us achieve more than we think we can.” Students also said that relationships between students were positive because “everyone knows each other, and everyone is for the most part accepting, and everyone is really cooperative and nice here.” School culture at SGS was described by several students as “fun”, “energetic” and “accepting”. Many students described relationships and culture at SGS as contributing to their self-confidence and to their positive experience as an SGS student.

## **Student Experiences: Transformation**

All participants in Student Group Interviews answered “yes” to the question *Have you transformed since becoming a SGS student?* The majority of students credited SGS with contributing to this transformation. The most common form of transformation experienced by students was an increase in self-confidence. Students experienced increases in confidence in domains ranging from public speaking, to specific school subjects, to sports. One girl expressed that since coming to the Seattle Girls School she “is more confident speaking in front of groups because we do it all the time, like at Community Meetings and Culminating Events.” Many girls shared that they are more confident in math and science at SGS and that they like the subjects more now than they did at their old schools. An increase in confidence in athletic abilities since becoming an SGS student was mentioned by several girls. Rotating Physical Education schedules and inclusive sports teams were credited with this rise in confidence. Many girls commented that they feel that they have transformed into more knowledgeable and aware citizens.

According to one girl:

I know more about world issues, and I care more about them. We talk about politics at SGS during class and during Community Meetings. Teachers don’t give us the edited version of history or events. I appreciate that.

Students also expressed that they had undergone a social transformation at SGS. One girl described her social transformation in terms of interacting with and befriending people of different backgrounds and worldviews. One student shared: “At SGS we all work together and listen to each other and let everyone talk before we make group decisions. I have learned a lot from being around such a diverse group of people.” Ultimately, the majority of students stated that they have been transformed in some way by their experiences at The Seattle Girls’ School. One sixth-grade student summed up her positive

experiences at SGS by asserting that over her time at SGS she has “become a butterfly.” Another sixth-grader shared that the school has been so positively transformative for her that she feels that she “was destined to come to SGS.”

## **Discussion**

### **Common Experiences of Empowerment**

This study has demonstrated that the Seattle Girls’ School’s unique recipe of schooling is empowering for girls because it bolsters students’ self-confidence and

resilience. The mechanism behind student empowerment at SGS is the clear and direct transference of empowerment from mission statement to the formal and informal school structures that shape student experiences. The diffusion of empowerment from ideology to structures to student reality is an indication of the clarity of the SGS Mission Statement, the purposefulness of the design of school structures, the doggedness of the evaluation these structures in terms of compliance with the Mission Statement, and finally, of the shared resolve of SGS community members to realize the overarching mission of student empowerment. This study demonstrates that student empowerment at SGS is neither an accident nor an afterthought.

One of the most important components of the SGS Mission Statement is the vision of the woman that students are empowered to become. This vision is the *World Woman Leader*. The most convincing evidence that SGS is fulfilling its mission is students' statements that their experiences at SGS increased their self-confidence and resilience. This evidence came from both sixth and seventh-grade students and was articulated in surprisingly similar terms throughout all three Student Group Interviews.

## **Differences in Student Responses to the Construct of the *World Woman Leader***

Overall, students experience SGS as empowering and transforming; however, differences in experience undoubtedly exist at the level of the individual. Although I

claim that students share a set of common experiences, I do not assert that their experiences are in any way identical or that we could predict with complete certainty how a given student will experience SGS. Systematic differences between students with regard to schooling experiences were illuminated by this study. The most interesting difference occurred between sixth and seventh-grade students with regard to their responses to the SGS vision of the *World Woman Leader*. Overall, seventh-grade students responded negatively to the vision itself and also to the SGS expectation that students embrace the vision of the *World Woman Leader*. Sixth-grade students, on the other hand, responded positively to both the idea of the *World Woman Leader* and the expectation that they become such women.

I find this difference fascinating because it is counter-intuitive. During interviews, both sixth and seventh-grade students claimed to experience SGS as empowering, identified similar structures within the school as mechanisms of empowerment, and generally articulated a positive and transformative school experience at SGS. However, when asked to consider their future selves, including the SGS vision and their own vision, a rift became apparent between the responses of seventh and sixth-grade students. This was surprising because responses to all other questions were remarkably aligned, regardless of grade level.

### **Seventh Grade Students: Highly Critical of the Construct of the *World Woman Leader***

What makes this difference counter-intuitive is that the older students – those who have been immersed in SGS’ empowering school environment for twice the amount of

time as the younger student population - rejected the vision at the heart of the SGS Mission Statement as narrowly defined and unreasonable to attain. Considering that the seventh graders reported positive experiences of empowerment at SGS, should not they also report a general acceptance and satisfaction with the ideal they are being empowering to become? Why would an increased time in an empowering environment based around the vision of the *World Woman Leader* fail to lead to an increased inclination of students to embrace the image and to co-opt it into their own visions of their future selves? What would lead to the assertion shared by all five seventh-grade interview participants: that the vision of the *World Woman Leader* is too narrow (one student remarked that within the archetype there is only room for famous persons and activists) and that the SGS expectation that students embrace this vision is unreasonable (one student stated that Ms. Brandon and her teachers expected students to become *World Women Leaders* regardless of a students' individual goals)?

One possible explanation of why the older students rejected the SGS vision of the *World Woman Leader* is that a natural consequence of empowerment is the formation of one's own vision of self, which would perhaps entail a rejection of other visions, regardless of how well-meaning or seemingly appropriate they may be. If the idea of empowerment is combined with the well-known proclivity of adolescents to reject the mores of their communities, then it would make sense that seventh grade students would reject the SGS vision. To test this hypothesis, I asked students to articulate their own vision of their future selves; I assumed that students who had the self-confidence to critique and reject the vision at the heart of SGS would have substituted a self-created vision. Instead, seventh grade students were largely unwilling or unable to articulate a

vision of their future selves. One student claimed that she wanted to become an actress. The other four seventh-grade students emphatically stated that they “did not know” what sort of woman they wanted to become, but when pressured, one student stated, with the others agreeing, that “I at least know that I want to be nice”. Why are these self-confident seventh-grade students silent when it comes to articulating their own visions of their future selves? Why are these visions so sparse; and why is ‘nice’ the only trait that these girls are willing to claim?

Unfortunately, my data do not allow me to answer these questions. I can speculate that if the rejection of the SGS vision of the *World Woman Leader* by all seventh grade interview participants is not the result of empowerment, it might be related to the silence of the majority of seventh-grade interview participants regarding alternative visions of future selves. Girls and women in our society experience conflicting images of womanhood and femininity. The Seattle Girls’ School upholds one image of the empowered woman – the *World Woman Leader* – but SGS students undoubtedly experience countless other messages of idealized womanhood, some or many of which conflict with SGS’ ideal. School may be an important venue of socialization of the young, but it is not the only place where children learn what it means to be gendered in our culture. Family, other communities (i.e. religious and ethnic communities) and the media present images and expectations of womanhood. Seventh-grade students may be feeling the pull of conflicting visions of womanhood to a greater extent than are sixth-grade students, and this, in part, may lead to their rejection of the *World Woman Leader* and to their inability to articulate a cohesive vision of their future selves.



Studies indicate that as girls progress through adolescence, social expectations to conform to prescribed gender roles become more strict and failure to conform becomes more devastating (Orenstein, 1994; Mann, 1994; Deak with Barker, 2002). Psychologist Carol Gilligan, who focuses on the moral development of women and girls, asserts that during adolescence, girls silence their voices in order to maintain relationships; this self-silencing has devastating implications for girls' self-confidence and resiliency (Gilligan, 1993). Despite advances in gender equality made by feminist and other social justice movements, girls in our society are still taught to believe that their value lies not in their minds nor in their voices nor in their capacities to become *World Women Leaders*, but instead in their bodies, in their prescribed roles in the private sphere as wives and mothers, and in their relationships with men. The conflict between who SGS is empowering them to become and contrasting images of womanhood received from elsewhere might explain the seventh grade students' confusion over visions of future selves and their focus on 'being nice'.

Further, seventh-grade students may reject the vision of the *World Woman Leader* because they fail to see how they can reconcile this image with contradictory visions of femininity to which they are experiencing increased pressure to subscribe. At its core, I would identify the *World Woman Leader* as a familiarly liberal feminist archetype, predominantly because it positions such a woman as a competent actor in the public sphere of politics, an arena still largely associated with men. This image is feminist in the liberal sense in that it is concerned at its roots with gender equality and because it subscribes to a traditional view of leadership and politics. Instead of suggesting that definitions of leadership, power, and politics be modified to reflect women's experiences,

this image holds that women can and should be added into existing definitions and structures. I hypothesize that although in some spheres the vision of the *World Woman Leader* may be venerated, for example in communities which subscribe to liberal feminist viewpoints, in many spheres, including many facets of popular culture, the *World Woman Leader* may be viewed negatively. The *World Woman Leader* in her most narrow incarnation is primarily defined as a famous politician or activist; she is certainly not sexy, she is certainly not an entertainer; and she is certainly no longer radical in the contemporary feminist sense of the term.

Perhaps seventh-grade students see the *World Woman Leader* as too narrow in part because they view her as incapable of absorbing or at the very least entering into dialogue with other visions of womanhood. Perhaps seventh-grade students perceive the concept of the *World Woman Leader* as too narrow because, in reality, it *is* too narrow; perhaps the vision is restrictive to students who do not wish to lead in traditional ways. One could critique the *World Woman Leader* as an archetype that is limiting, that many women would not see their desires and experiences mirrored in the vision, and thus, these women would not be willing to subscribe to the archetype. However, if the rejection of the *World Woman Leader* took place on the level of the individual, I would expect a subset of sixth and seventh-grade students to reject the image. Instead, we see rejection of the image at the group level, suggesting that rejection is based less on a critique of the image itself and more on increasing social pressures to adopt competing visions of womanhood and femininity.

The consequences of the seventh-grade students' rejection of the *World Woman Leader* are impossible to know at this time. Perhaps in adulthood students will return to

the vision of the *World Woman Leader*; perhaps they will strike a compromise between competing visions, creating a hybrid model; and perhaps these students will embrace an image of womanhood completely separate from the *World Woman Leader*. We will not know until further studies collect more data about this population. Further studies should include all seventh-grade students to determine whether this sample's perceptions are shared by the larger SGS seventh grade community. Further, we will not know if we are seeing a piece of a natural pattern, nor will we know the contours of such a pattern, or if this seventh-grade class is an anomaly, until a large scale longitudinal study is undertaken following SGS students over a long period of time.

### **Sixth Grade Students: Embrace vision of the *World Woman Leader***

Unlike their older school-mates, sixth-grade students overwhelmingly embraced the SGS archetype of the *World Woman Leader*. Sixth-grade students tended to see the vision as expansive and the SGS expectation that students realize the vision as reasonable. When discussing visions of their future selves, sixth-grade students tended to use characteristics associated with the *World Woman Leader*. Although no student identified the *World Woman Leader* archetype by name as the type of woman she wanted to become, all students identified pieces of the larger *World Woman Leader* archetype as shaping their vision of their future selves. I have identified the two most common aspects of the *World Woman Leader* adopted by girls into their own visions as *Activist* and *Professional*. Although the majority of girls emphasized/identified one or the other ideal, two girls articulated that they planned to balance both roles.

Why did sixth-grade students embrace the SGS vision, considering the negative attitude of seventh-grade students toward the archetype? I argue that they did so for three reasons: first, they viewed the image as broad and thus were more easily able to modify the vision to suit their own experiences and goals; second, they identified ways in which SGS was preparing them to become *World Woman Leaders*, and thus felt that it was a reasonable expectation on behalf of the school; and third, sixth-grade students are younger than seventh-grade students, and thus perhaps still immune to the social demands made of adolescent girls that paint achievement and relationships as mutually exclusive. I examine each reason below.

Sixth-grade students tended to define the *World Woman Leader* as a broad category, asserting that women could be activists and leaders in a myriad of ways. Regardless of whether SGS would agree with these sentiments, because sixth-grade students viewed the archetype as fluid, I argue that they were better able to attach their own experiences and dreams to the model and thus better able to make the model relevant to their own lives. Also, sixth-grade students tended to define leader and leadership more broadly, allowing them to see themselves as leaders even in non-traditional capacities. For example, one student remarked that “all people have the capability to be leaders but not everyone chooses to be one”. Another student stated that she would consider herself a leader even if she became a professional and did not become involved in politics.

Sixth grade students also recognized the specific ways in which SGS empowered them to become *World Women Leaders*. Because students saw SGS as facilitating their maturation into leadership positions, they did not see the SGS expectation that they become *World Women Leaders* as misguided or unreasonable. These students identified

specific mechanisms as encouraging the skills and characteristics necessary for a *World Woman Leader*: the SGS curriculum and school structure to build confidence, critical thinking skills, and political awareness; and Culminating Events and Community Meetings to build public speaking and dialoguing skills. Although seventh-grade students also acknowledged these mechanisms of empowerment, they did not express the same level of recognition that the larger purpose of the mechanisms was to empower students to become *World Women Leaders*. This leads me to wonder if SGS has between its first and second year of operation refined its methods of imparting to students the purpose of various school structures.

Finally, I would suggest that sixth-grade students, at 11 or 12-years-old, may not yet experience the onslaught of sexist visions of womanhood and femininity with which seventh-grade students are confronted. Psychologists argue that young girls, including girls in the very early stages of adolescence, are largely buffered from these demands by a strong sense of self and resilience; these attributes are gradually worn away as adolescence progresses (Deak with Barker, 2002). Perhaps sixth-grade students are more naturally immune to the social phenomena that encourage seventh grade students to reject the SGS vision of the *World Woman Leader* and at the same time render them incapable of describing an alternative vision. To test this hypothesis requires revisiting sixth-grade students as seventh-graders, conducting longitudinal studies to track changes in their attitudes and experiences with regard to empowerment and visions of future selves.

## Limitations

The primary limitation of this investigation is that it took the form of a case study of a very specific community. Thus, the knowledge produced is highly limited in its generalizability beyond the Seattle Girls' School community. A second limitation is one of reliability and validity. The school population numbers 72; my sample size for all SGS students was small (N=17), and the number of seventh-grade students was even smaller (N=5). An increase of participants, particularly seventh-grade students, would increase the validity of my results and determine if the differences uncovered between sixth and seventh-grade students exist in the general SGS population. Further, I only was able to observe and conduct interviews during one week at SGS; thus, my data represents a tiny slice of time, and there is no way to be certain whether this week was representative of other weeks at SGS. Varying the months and times of observations and interviews at the school would allow for checks against systematic bias and may present a more accurate view of SGS. Limitations also were inherent in my chosen methods. Student Group Interviews perhaps created an uncomfortable environment where some participants might have felt embarrassed or silenced; more and different information might be solicited in individual interviews with students. Also, interviews were relatively short (30 minutes each). Longer interviews would have allowed for more probing questions. Finally, my own personal bias, especially the personal connection I feel with SGS community members, has undoubtedly colored all aspects of this research project.

## **Future Research**

Future investigations of empowerment within the Seattle Girls' School should determine the long term effects of an SGS education on students' personal and professional lives. Faculty and staff at SGS are interested in understanding these effects.

Ms. Brandon said that at the very least she hoped that high schools would “always be able to recognize the SGS student because she would be outspoken and confident in class”. SGS hopes that an empowering middle school education will benefit students throughout their lives, and will encourage them to follow the path of a *World Women Leader*. However, without increased and longitudinal research into the lasting effects of an SGS education, differences in experiences between SGS students, and the existence of patterns such as the one potentially illuminated by this study will be speculative. Finally, ascertaining this information is crucial to determining empirically the benefits of the SGS model of education, and the ways it might be modified and improved.

## Conclusion

What does this small study of the Seattle Girls’ School contribute to the body of knowledge about schooling and the empowerment of girls? In its broadest application, the results from this study might inform models of schooling for girls and perhaps, with

modification, for all children. One of Ms. Brandon's goals for SGS is that the school might serve as a model of education and teacher training in single-sex and co-educational contexts. To make this knowledge useful in the practical pursuit of creating schools in varying contexts (for example, variable student demographics, school size, curricular focus, and geography of school) more knowledge is necessary regarding the specific results of individual SGS components and combinations of components. Can components of SGS be isolated and identified as particularly empowering apart from and in combination with other components? If this were the case, SGS could become not only a model but also a tool box, allowing various institutions to draw bits and pieces from the SGS model in order to create an empowering environment within their specific educational contexts. However, divorcing components from the whole may prove to be impossible, and SGS may better serve as a holistic model for educating girls.

Although communities removed from the Seattle Girls' School may be surprised that SGS is such a universally empowering experience for students, SGS community members and most persons associated or familiar with the school will certainly not be surprised by the results of this study. Overall, the SGS community seems confident in their mission and methods, and I hope that my findings will further validate the model of educating girls that they have created. I also hope that the potential pattern of differences found between sixth and seventh grade students' attitudes toward the *World Woman Leader* archetype will constitute new information for SGS. If this pattern exists in the larger student population, SGS would do well to further investigate the phenomenon of rejecting the SGS vision of the *World Woman Leader* without replacing it with an alternative vision of future self apparent among the seventh grade participants in this



research study. Knowledge of the causes and consequences of this phenomenon could inform modifications of the SGS model of education, allowing the school to better serve its students.

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## Appendix A

### **Seattle Girls' School Mission Statement**

From *Frequently Asked Questions* (2002) Seattle Girls' School

“The mission of SGS is to empower middle school girls to think critically and seek creative solutions to real world problems in a challenging academic environment that highlights math, science and technology, embraces diversity and promotes collaboration, integrated learning and respect for all.”

## **Appendix B**

### **Recruitment Speeches**

#### **To Students at a Seattle Girls’ School Community Meeting:**

Hello, my name is Sarah Childers. I am an undergraduate student at the University of Washington in the Women Studies Department. For my senior thesis I am doing research

here at the Seattle Girls' School. I want to better understand how students experience the Seattle Girls' School's unique mission and structures. I want to interview member of the Seattle Girls' School community about their experiences with curriculum, special programs such as mentorships and internships, the school environment, and about their future goals. Two interviews will be held: one for students and one for faculty and staff. Both interviews will be in a group format. During the student interview, which will last approximately 30 minutes and will be held before school and after lunch, I will ask questions about your experiences as a Seattle Girls' School student. For example, I might ask you "What is your favorite part of the Seattle Girls' School and why?", "What sort of woman do you think Marja and your teachers want you to grow up to become?" and "What sort of woman do you want to grow up to become?" The interview is confidential. If you would like to participate in the student group interview, please ask me, Marja, or one of your teachers for a parental consent form. After your parents have read and signed their consent form, I will give you an assent form to read and sign. If you have any questions about participating in this study or about my research in general, please feel free to ask me today. Or you can email me at [schilder@u.washington.edu](mailto:schilder@u.washington.edu). Thank you!

#### **To Parents/Guardians at a Parent Group Meeting:**

Hello, my name is Sarah Childers. I am an undergraduate student at the University of Washington in the Women Studies Department. For my senior thesis I am doing research here at the Seattle Girls' School. I want to better understand how students experience the Seattle Girls' School's unique mission and structures. I want to interview member of the Seattle Girls' School community about their experiences with curriculum, special programs such as mentorships and internships, the school environment, and about their future goals. I would like to hold several group interviews for students. During these interviews, which will last approximately 30 minutes each and will be held at the Seattle Girls' School before school and during lunch, I will ask questions about your daughter's experiences at the Seattle Girls' School. I might ask you questions like: "Have you changed since becoming a Seattle Girls' School Student" and "How do you describe the Seattle Girls' School to your friends who don't go to school here?" The interview is confidential. If you would like to give your daughter permission to participate in an interview, please sign and return the Parental Interview Consent Form. Your daughter then will then sign a Student Interview Consent Form if she chooses to participate. If you have any questions about your daughter's participation in this study or about my research in general, please feel free to ask me today. Or you can email me at [schilder@u.washington.edu](mailto:schilder@u.washington.edu). Thank you.

## **Appendix C**

### **Interview Questions for Marja Brandon, Head of Seattle Girls School**

15. What vision shaped the conception of the Seattle Girl School? Does this same vision continue to influence the growth and structure of the school?

16. If so, tell me about this vision. Where does it come from? How prominently does it shape administrative policies, school structure, relationships, school atmosphere, etc?
17. How apparent is this vision in day to day life at the Seattle Girls School?
18. Is the staff consciously aware of this vision? How are they made aware?
19. Are the students aware of this vision? How are they made aware?
20. The Seattle Girls School mission statement is very explicit about what the school hopes to empower its students *to do*. What does SGS empower its students *to be*?
21. From your literature it seems that there are four formal mechanisms of empowerment at the Seattle Girls School. I've identified these mechanisms as: Integrated curriculum; curricular focus on math, science, and technology; special programs like mentorships and internships; and extra curricular activities. Do these mechanisms further your vision and facilitate empowerment of your students? If so, how?
22. Are there informal mechanisms that support your vision and empower students?
23. What do you think is the most empowering aspect of the Seattle Girls School, in terms of empowering "to do" and empowering "to be"?
24. Is the Seattle Girls School a transformative experience for students?
25. If so, in what ways do you facilitate this transformation?
26. Would you characterize Seattle Girls School students as gifted or talented? Why or why not?
27. What is your vision for the future of the Seattle Girls School?
28. Is there anything else that you think I should know about the Seattle Girls School?

## Appendix D

### Student Interview Questions

15. How long have you been a student at the Seattle Girls School?

16. Why are you a student at the Seattle Girls School?
17. How would you describe the Seattle Girls' School to a friend who doesn't go to school here?
18. How do you experience all of the unique aspects of the Seattle Girls School?
19. What is your favorite part of the Seattle Girls School? Why?
20. Is there anything about the Seattle Girls School that you don't enjoy? Why?
21. Would you characterize yourself as talented or gifted? Why or why not.
22. Have you changed since you became a Seattle Girls School student? In what ways?
23. Do you think the Seattle Girls School has contributed to this change? In what ways?
24. Are you aware of the Seattle Girls School Mission Statement? If so, how are you made aware?
25. What sort of woman do you think Marja, your teachers, and the Seattle Girls School staff want you to grow up to be?
26. How do you know this?
27. What sort of woman do you want to grow up to be? Why?
28. Is there anything else that you think I should know about the Seattle Girls School?

## **Appendix E**



**UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON CONSENT FORM**  
***Mission, Mechanisms, and Experiences of Empowerment at the Seattle Girls School***

Head of Seattle Girls' School Interview Consent Form

Investigator:

Sarah Childers

Student

Women Studies Department

Telephone: (206) 910-6749

e-mail: schilders@u.washington.edu

**Investigator's Statement**

I am asking you to be in a research study. The purpose of this consent form is to give you the information you will need to help you decide whether or not to be in the study. Please read the form carefully. You may ask questions about the purpose of the research, what I would ask you to do, the possible risks and benefits, your rights as a volunteer, and anything else about the research or this form that is not clear. When all your questions have been answered, you can decide if you want to be in the study or not. This process is called 'informed consent.'

**PURPOSE AND BENEFITS**

I want to better understand how students experience the Seattle Girls School's unique mission and structures. I would like to interview students, faculty, and staff about their experiences with the school's Mission Statement, curriculum, special programs such as mentorships and internships, the school environment, and about their future goals. I hope the results of this study will help the Seattle Girls School community better understand how girls experience the unique education offered by the Seattle Girls School. You may not directly benefit from taking part in this research study.

**PROCEDURES**

If you choose to be in this study, I would like to interview you about your experiences at the Seattle Girls School. The interview will last about an hour, and will focus on the unique aspects of the Seattle Girls School, issues of empowerment, and your experiences as Head of the Seattle Girls School. For example, I might ask you, "What makes the Seattle Girls School unique?" and "Is the Seattle Girls School a transformative experience for girls?" You do not have to answer every question.

I would like to audiotape the interviews so that I can have an accurate record. Only my advisor and I will have access to the audiotapes, which will be kept in a secure location. We will transcribe the interview tape within 3 weeks of the interview and destroy the tape. Please indicate below whether you give your permission for the interview to be audiotaped.

**RISKS, STRESS, OR DISCOMFORT**

Some people feel that providing information for research is an invasion of privacy. I have addressed concerns for your privacy in the section below. Some people feel self-conscious when they are audiotaped.

### **OTHER INFORMATION**

Taking part in this study is voluntary. You can stop at any time. Study information is confidential. However, I may want to quote you directly. In that case, I will ask you to review a direct quote and edit it before you give me your written permission to use your name with the quotation.

If you have any questions about this research study, please contact Sarah Childers at the telephone number or e-mail listed above. If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, please contact the University of Washington Human Subjects Division: 206-543-0098.

I may want to re-contact you to clarify information from your interview. In that case, I will telephone you and ask you for a convenient time to ask you additional questions closely related to your interview. Please indicate below whether or not you give your permission for me to re-contact you for that purpose.

---

Signature of investigator

Printed Name

Date

### **Subject's Statement**

This study has been explained to me. I volunteer to take part in this research. I have had a chance to ask questions. If I have questions later on about the research I can ask Sarah Childers, the investigator. If I have questions about my rights as a research subject, I can call the University of Washington Human Subjects Division at (206) 543-0098. I will receive a copy of this consent form.

\_\_\_\_\_ I give my permission for the researcher to audiotape my interview.

\_\_\_\_\_ I do NOT give my permission for the researcher to audiotape my interview.

\_\_\_\_\_ I give my permission for the researcher to re-contact me to clarify information.

\_\_\_\_\_ I do NOT give my permission for the researcher to re-contact me.

---

Signature of subject

Printed name

Date

## **Appendix F**

**UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON CONSENT FORM**  
***Mission, Mechanisms, and Experiences of Empowerment at the Seattle Girls School***  
Parental Consent Form

Investigator:

Sarah Childers

Student

Women Studies Department

Telephone: (206) 910-6749

e-mail: [schilder@u.washington.edu](mailto:schilder@u.washington.edu)

**Investigator's Statement**

I am asking your permission for your daughter to volunteer to participate in a research study. The purpose of this consent form is to give you the information you will need to help you decide whether or not to give your daughter permission to participate. Please read the form carefully. You may ask questions about the purpose of the research, what I would ask your daughter to do, the possible risks and benefits, her rights as a volunteer, and anything else about the research or this form that is not clear. When all your questions have been answered, you can decide whether you will give your daughter permission to be in the study or not. This process is called 'informed consent.'

**PURPOSE AND BENEFITS**

I want to better understand how students experience the Seattle Girls School's unique mission and structures. I would like to interview students, faculty, and staff about their experiences with the school's Mission Statement, curriculum, special programs such as mentorships and internships, the school environment, and about their future goals. I hope the results of this study will help the Seattle Girls School community better understand how girls experience the unique education offered by the Seattle Girls School. Your daughter may not directly benefit from taking part in this research study.

**PROCEDURES**

If you choose to give your daughter permission to volunteer to be in this study, I would like to interview her about her experiences as a Seattle Girls School student. The interview will last about 30 minutes, will take place in a group format, and will focus on students' experiences at the Seattle Girls School. For example, I will ask your daughter, "Is the Seattle Girls School different from your last school? In what ways?", "What is your favorite part of the Seattle Girls School and why?" and "What sort of woman do you want to grow up to become?" Your daughter does not have to answer every question.

I would like to audiotape the interview so that I can have an accurate record. If you agree to allow your daughter to participate in the study, you also agree that she may be audiotaped. Only my advisor and I will have access to the audiotapes, which will be kept in a secure location. I will transcribe the interview tape within 3 weeks of the interview and destroy the tape.

### **RISKS, STRESS, OR DISCOMFORT**

Some people feel that providing information for research is an invasion of privacy. I have addressed concerns for your daughter's privacy in the section below. Some people feel self-conscious when they are audiotaped.

### **OTHER INFORMATION**

Taking part in this study is voluntary. Your daughter can stop at any time. The researcher will keep the study information confidential. I will ask participants to keep responses confidential, but some group members may talk to other people about the discussion. I cannot guarantee the confidentiality of the discussion. If the results of this study are published or presented, I will not use your daughter's real name nor will I include any distinguishing characteristics.

If you have any questions about this research study, please contact Sarah Childers at the telephone number or e-mail listed above, or Marja Brandon, Head of the Seattle Girls School. If you have any questions about your daughter's rights as a research subject, please contact the University of Washington Human Subjects Division: 206-543-0098.

---

Signature of investigator

Printed Name

Date

#### **Subject's Statement**

This study has been explained to me. I give my daughter permission to volunteer to take part in this research. I have had a chance to ask questions. If I have questions later on about the research I can ask the investigator listed above. I give my permission for the researcher to audiotape the group discussion. If I have questions about my daughter's rights as a research subject, I can call the University of Washington Human Subjects Division at (206) 543-0098. I will receive a copy of this consent form.

---

Parent or Guardian's Signature

Printed name

Date

## **Appendix G**

**UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON ASSENT FORM**  
***Mission, Mechanisms, and Experiences of Empowerment at the Seattle Girls School***  
Seattle Girls' School Student Assent Form

Investigator:

Sarah Childers

Student

Women Studies Department

Telephone: (206) 910-6749

e-mail: schilders@u.washington.edu

**Investigator's Statement**

I am asking you to be in a research study. Your parents have given you permission to participate, but the choice is up to you. The purpose of this consent form is to give you the information you will need to help you decide whether or not to be in the study. Please read the form carefully. You may ask me questions about the purpose of the research, questions I might ask you, the possible risks and benefits, your rights as a volunteer, and anything else about the research or this form that is not clear. When all your questions have been answered, you can decide if you want to be in the study or not. This process is called 'informed consent.'

**PURPOSE AND BENEFITS**

I want to understand how students experience the Seattle Girls School's unique mission and structures. I would like to interview students, faculty, and staff about their experiences with the school's Mission Statement, curriculum, special programs such as mentorships and internships, the school environment, and about their future goals. I hope the results of this study will help the Seattle Girls School community better understand how girls experience the unique education offered by the Seattle Girls School. You may not directly benefit from taking part in this research study.

**PROCEDURES**

If you choose to be in this study, I would like to interview you about your experiences at the Seattle Girls School. The interview will last about 30 minutes, will take place in a group format, and will focus on your experiences as a student. For example, I will ask you, "Is the Seattle Girls School different from your last school? In what ways?", "What is your favorite part of SGS and why?" and "What sort of woman do you want to grow up to become?" You do not have to answer every question.

I would like to audiotape the interview so that I can have an accurate record. If you agree to participate in the study, you also agree to be audiotaped. Only my advisor and I will have access to the audiotapes, which will be kept in a secure location. We will transcribe the interview tape within 3 weeks of the interview and destroy the tape.

### **RISKS, STRESS, OR DISCOMFORT**

Some people feel that providing information for research is an invasion of privacy. I have addressed concerns for your privacy in the section below. Some people feel self-conscious when they are audiotaped.

### **OTHER INFORMATION**

Taking part in this study is voluntary. You can stop at any time. I will keep the study information confidential, but some group member may talk to other people about the discussion. We cannot guarantee the confidentiality of the discussion. If the results of this study are published or presented, I will not use your real name nor will I include any distinguishing characteristics.

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Signature of investigator

Printed Name

Date

### **Subject's Statement**

This study has been explained to me. I volunteer to take part in this research. I have had a chance to ask questions. I give my permission for the researcher to audiotape the group discussion. If I have questions later on about the research I can ask Sarah Childers, the investigator, Marja Brandon, school Head, or one of my teachers at the Seattle Girls School. If I have questions about my rights as a research subject, I can call the University of Washington Human Subjects Division at (206) 543-0098. I will receive a copy of this consent form.

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Signature of subject

Printed name

Date

