

## Sarah Plain and Tall

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### Abstract

The purpose of this participatory action research study was to develop a better understanding of stress in the lives of adolescents, to understand how they cope, and to assess their response to a program developed to help them cope positively with the stress they are facing. The following article focuses on the relationship I established with a student named Sarah. Sarah's story will be told in the form of a narrative, to capture my conversations, observations, and interactions with her during my time in her classroom.

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Please allow me to introduce you to Sarah. She and I met when I worked in her class one spring. As a researcher, my goal was to learn about those things that caused stress for her and her peers, and to offer positive strategies for mitigating the stressors they faced. As I taught in this classroom, interviewed students, and observed behaviours and relationships, it was immediately evident that Sarah was a victim of bullying, and was also shaken by the shock of exclusion (Elkind, 1984) and isolation that often accompanies adolescence. In the following article, Sarah tells her own story. The words have risen out of our conversations, interviews, my observations and reflective journals, and her own written work.

My heart broke as I watched the tears of pain roll down Sarah's cheeks. After nine weeks of working together, it seems that this research study has really caused her to dig deep as she discusses some of the pain that it is to be her. "Nobody thinks I'm special. Boys are all dumb. How can they do that to a person, picking on them the way they pick on me?"

I reminded her that "All princes start as frogs," in a feeble attempt to lighten her mood.

"It's hard to be positive when you are picked on all the time. Those other people ~ how can they live with themselves?"

"Don't give them all your energy, Sarah," I countered, "they don't deserve it. Don't spend your energy there."

"It's hard!" she screeched at me, "I hate them! I just wish the whole Shields family would be killed in a car crash!" Turning to me, she asked, "Do you know the Shields family?" I do not know the Shields family

personally, but since Mr. Shields is a prominent figure in the community, I am familiar with who he is.

Sarah went on to fill me in, and then referring to Mr. Shields she said, “Oh sure, nice family on the outside. There’s just one little thing that disturbs the image: his family! He’s got a rotten son. His son Mark he’s a son of a beep<sup>1</sup> you know? You get the picture? I wish he would choke on his own poison and die!” she screamed, sobbing.

Sarah’s teaching assistant Mrs. Adams walked over with a box of tissue and sat down. “This is good,” she said. “She needs to get this anger out. We’ve been working on encouraging Sarah to write these feelings down.”

“Maybe you could jump on your trampoline today?” I suggest.

“I guess,” Sarah responds.

“You know Sarah, today in class we talked about forgiveness as a way to be more positive. Wouldn’t it be better to let some of that anger roll off of you?” suggests Mrs. Adams.

I went on to further this thought, “Sarah, when you forgive, you release the other person, and by doing that, you release the grip they have on you. Anger then has no more power over you. Those people have no more power over you when you forgive and let it go.”

“Yeah, right,” Sarah retorts. Classroom teacher Mrs. Smith approaches us and sits down across from Sarah, saying, “You

know, Sarah, I believe that what goes around, comes around.”

“Oh, so you mean that one day Mark will be bullied as bad as he bullied me?” she questions.

“Well, maybe he’ll be in a different situation that will make him realize how he has treated others, and how he should treat people,” replied Mrs. Smith.

“Well, I hope so,” said Sarah.

In another pathetic attempt to be encouraging, I piped in, “Only two more months left, and then you’re outta here!”

“Ha!” Sarah blurts. “It feels like two million, trillion years.”

Mrs. Smith broke in, turning the conversation in a different direction. “Next year, you will be going to Sherbrook High School, and you’ll have lots of friends to choose from, and it will all be new.”

“No one will like me there. All of those people have their nice little lives,” said Sarah.

“You have a nice life too, Sarah,” Mrs. Smith counters.

“Yeah, if you call being picked on and being treated like a freak everyday,” says Sarah.

## **The Person Behind the Pain**

“What’s it is like to be you?” I asked Sarah during an interview.

“Awful!” she shouted back at me.

“What’s awful?” I asked.

“Well, I have to put up with friends who try to impress people that are *rude*, by being

<sup>1</sup> All quotes taken from interview transcripts are verbatim. In some instances, student’s have “censored” their own words, such as Sarah did above.

rude themselves. And, apparently, *God made me His chew toy 'cause God just loves to pick on me!*”<sup>2</sup>

I probed further, “What’s it like going to Yorkdale School?”

“It’s terrible ‘cause that’s where the stuff happens.” She went on to share that her community is a good community to live in, but the people in it are bad. Sarah ended our interview by saying, “this school is rotten!” Sarah’s descriptive imagination and ability to verbalize her feelings causes her hurt to really come to life. There is so much pain in her heart and in her words as she shares what it is like to be her. Sarah, who is white, has been attending this school since kindergarten, and has always been different. She has a learning disability. Sarah has a team of people supporting her in her education, including two very involved parents, a full time teaching assistant who travels with her to each class every day, and a counsellor outside of the school. Sarah is a very bright, incredibly articulate, and creative student who is also a quick thinker and an amazing writer. Sarah appears to have no “filter” and fully speaks whatever is on her mind. How lonely and isolating it must be to be Sarah. In this class, and apparently throughout the school day, she is needled, teased, and bullied.

Other students are not kind to Sarah. While some do not treat her with unkindness, neither do they make a move to include her or invite her into their circle. Perhaps that would be too risky, after all, she is different. Sarah is sad and mad. In the three months that I worked at Yorkdale School, I did not see her laugh or smile once. Instead, she sat slumped forward, arms folded, and head hung low.

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<sup>2</sup> Italics used to emphasize when certain words were shouted during an interview.

### **Sarah on “Stress”**

During our first interview together, I asked students to explain what stress is. Sarah’s definition of stress was highly descriptive. In her words, “Well stress is sort of like, um, soda pop in a can. You know, imagine that it’s calm at first but then someone comes along and starts to shake that can and you gotta’ let the stress out to someone right away because the more you keep it down, well, the bigger the mess it will be when you open it up.” For Sarah, stress really is like a shaken can of soda pop. The hurt that she has experienced in her life is expressed with overt anger and hostility toward others. She is confrontational and ready to unleash her wrath on anyone who crosses her.

### **Changing Relationships, the Shock of Exclusion & Popular Girls**

“Going to school with ‘Team Psycho’ and listening to pointless conversations about boys” are a few things that cause stress for Sarah. When I probed further, for examples of things that would cause someone her age to experience stress, Sarah launched into a dialogue about the pain of changing relationships and being excluded during adolescence. “Well, there are some people who have been friends with someone for a long time but then their friends start to make friends with someone else and ignore their old friend, so that would cause stress.”

She explains further, “I remember when I was younger, well, you didn’t really just have a few best friends, like, all the girls in your room were best friends. Sarah went on to share how her former friends have gone on to enjoy the antics of a boy she describes as “cruel to the bone,” a person who has made life very miserable for some underdogs. Sarah wailed, “I thought they were my friends. They used to be when we

were younger. This isn't going to reach any of them, right? Good, because they're *just a bunch of miserable little snots who've got mosquitoes stuck up their butts.*"

Adolescence can be a time of changing social groups, and many of the girls whom Sarah used to play with have moved on to different social groups. Sarah is experiencing a classic case of the "shock of exclusion" that David Elkind (1984) first described. Adolescence brings with it many "shocks" and one of them is the shock of exclusion, where individuals who used to be friends, because proximity made it convenient, seek out different friends, based on similar values, attitudes, and interests. With increased mobility, proximity no longer determines with whom an individual maintains a friendship. This shock of exclusion has left a huge void in Sarah's life, and it is very painful for her.

The stress of being excluded has grown into contempt for the girls who used to be Sarah's friends when they were younger. She spends much of her energy despising these girls. Through informal observations, it would appear that Sarah can be quite confrontational with her former friends, and shows little restraint when it comes to sharing her thoughts and feelings. These girls, who have become the "popular girls" exclude her, ignore her, roll their eyes at her, and when provoked, verbally duke it out with Sarah.

Sarah feels that these girls are shallow, and all they care about are boys. "...basically these people, all they're concerned about is boys, boys, boys, and that's pretty much it. And here's something I've learned: If these girls can't find anyone else to be mean to, they turn on each other. So, maybe they're not as close as they appear to be to everyone else." Sarah's observations are sharp, and so

are her words. Her confrontational nature can, at times, contribute to a tense classroom climate.

Sarah suggested that perhaps some of these girls are stressed out with their own lives, and pick on her as a means to vent some of their own stress. Sarah went on to explain, "Maybe most of the girls, mainly my ex friends, maybe most of them have got stress in their lives and maybe they're dealing with stress in a negative way by picking on me, and stuff." When I asked her what advice she has for those girls, to help them cope more positively, she shouted, "*The next time you have the urge to play the cruel game of 'torture the freak,' keep your big, fat, trap shut!*"

Sarah and I explored the need for people to feel popular, or to be accepted by the popular crowd. Sarah felt that "Only pathetically stupid and desperate people would" want to be friends with popular people, if those popular people are mean. Sarah also suggested that others want to be popular "even if it means not being sensitive to your best friend's feelings." Sarah then launched into an attack of her friend who is striving to get in with the popular crowd. "I don't know. Here's something ironic," Sarah said. "A lot of people do things they think will make them popular, you know, like bully people who are socially beneath them when in reality it just makes them look like an insecure 'wanna be!' That's what Alli looks like now. Someone who's insecure and a total 'wanna be'.... The only reason why Alli even wants to be friends with Dawn is because she's impressed by her oh so heavenly, skinny figure, and by her cool style of clothes and makeup. And she also wants to be friends with Andrea because Andrea is from Africa, right, and she thinks that probably Africans have a lot of cool jewelry and stuff like that, and she's afraid that if she's no longer friends with them, all

that stuff will just be taken away from her. *I think I'd rather be a dork for the rest of my life than be a totally inconsiderate wart to my friends.*"

Sarah is very upset that her friend Alli is attracted to the popular crowd, and is trying to fit in with them. Alli lets Sarah down when she fails to speak up in defence of the underdog, when Sarah thinks Alli should. Instead, Alli sits idly by, and watches the drama unfold. This infuriates Sarah, as she laments "Well, now I'm not sure if I want to be Alli's friend any more. *That's not Alli! Someone stole her and replaced her with this robot clone of her!*"

Girls' emotions tend to be very social in nature and their negative emotions are often caused by interpersonal conflict rising out of what they perceive as breaches in behaviour expected from peers, family and romantic partners. Adolescent females desire solidarity with these people, and when there is a breach of trust, relational strains and stress result (Larson & Asmussen, 1991). Sarah feels a breach of trust with Alli, whom she feels has let her down by attempting to break into a new social groups.

Sarah went on to share a time when she was involved in a group science project. "And, you know what? One time during our science project, guess who I was partnered with? Alli and Andrea! I hate Andrea I can't stand her." Dripping with sarcasm, she goes on, "Who wants to be like her? Oh, wait, I know! That girl I was telling you about - Alli she's the friend who didn't listen to me when I tried to tell her about those rude girls. When I tried to tell her about how mean and manipulative Dawn was, she wouldn't listen to me."

My hypothesis is that Sarah truly wants to protect those she cares about from the

popular girls whom she sees as "rude little snots," and also feels threatened that if her friends try to get into that crowd, that she might lose them, or already has.

One day during a game of dodgeball in gym class, an incident arose where one of the popular girls hit one of Sarah's friends in the head with a ball. Sarah explains, "Well, Dawn accidentally or purposely, I don't know hit one of my friends, Joy, on the head with a ball and, um, Joy was crying. This really got to me because she's normally a tough girl so I sat by her. And you know what? I was just about ready to commit my first murder because while I was comforting Joy, Dawn was standing there smiling. Yeah, she actually was, as though it was the cutest thing in the world. And, even though she said she was sorry, I could tell from the look on her face she didn't really mean it.... And then she walked away with a flip of her hair. Little snot!" When I asked Sarah what she could do to cope with the pain she feels at the hands of these girls, she suggested that a good strategy to try might be to, "not [focus] on the friends that betrayed you and try focusing on the people who are still with you, no matter what." That would be a very good coping technique for Sarah, if she can harness the energy produced from her anger, and channel it in a positive manner.

Thoughts on Boys & Bullies

"Who bullies you?" I asked Sarah.

She shared, "It's mostly from guys, you know. Guys are like bloodhounds, they can smell fear.... They find your weakness, then they use it against you.... Anyway, if you try to stand up for yourself, the guys just sort of point and laugh at you. They actually think they're being funny." I cannot imagine how one would cope with daily, incessant bullying. When asked how she copes, she shares, "Unfortunately, standing up to them

does not work; neither does violence. And neither does ignoring because they still continue to do it and they laugh at you. Like, the boys actually think they're being funny; well, if *they're* being funny, do you know what that means? *I'm the Queen of France!* If I was, I'd throw them in a dungeon!"

With all of the rage that Sarah feels toward those who pick on her, she could not help but muse over their possible fate. "They're going to end up in jail, or they'll end up working in a drive in, or they'll become taxi cab drivers, or they'll cut hair at the mall!" Further on she elaborates, "Actually, the bullies, in my opinion all the people who pick on me now are not going to be successful later in life. Like, um, when they're busy picking on people all the time, they're not going to get a job because they won't be able to relate to people so good. And, if you act like an insensitive beast, you'll lose your job 'cause you won't care what happens to it." Her final prediction of their probable fate: "I think that one day at least one of my tormentors will anger someone who's bigger than them. That person's going to beat the living daylight out of them!" she said with satisfaction.

Being teased is not something that has suddenly happened at the onset of adolescence for Sarah. She shares, "You know how there's always one kid that every boy is going to pick on? That was me and, um, well stuff like that doesn't make me in the mood to do my homework and I sometimes leave my homework till late at night" which often augments stress for Sarah in her life.

### **The Risk of Rage**

There is no doubt that an individual who is persistently treated unfairly, picked on, and bullied would feel angry and helpless. Sarah's anger toward her perpetrators is

strong, and is a "red flag" for me. I fear that her anger may one day lead to an act of rage. If fully unleashed on someone at a later date, Sarah's rage could put her, or others, at grave risk.

Sarah shared in a written piece of work that after being incessantly needed by a boy, she dug her nails into his arm, and was very proud to have left marks behind. I asked her to explain what happened. Sarah did not relate the incident, but said, "He seemed sorry about it well, he didn't until after I hurt him...he had it coming." The satisfaction from having dug nail marks in this boy's arm must have left Sarah feeling as though she had some control, and was less of a victim, something she does not experience often.

During an interview, I reminded Sarah about a class discussion we had on elite athletes and the amazing skills they have honed, such as commitment and drive. "What kinds of those skills do you wish you could just grab hold of?" I asked.

"I don't know the ability to beat someone up!" she said emphatically. I mentioned to Sarah that I sensed a lot of aggression in her. She agreed. I decided to be blunt and ask her if she thought that she was really going to hurt someone one day. She thought about it and responded, "I might if they continue to push my buttons....People who have hurt me *if they're going to throw a tomato at me, I'm going to throw a brick back at them!*"

One homework assignment asked students to write about an incident where they experienced an emotion, and took the energy yielded from that emotion and used it in a positive manner, and an example of when they used it in a negative manner. Sarah explained, "The worst negative energy I remember happened when William nearly drove Xavier out of school and then bragged

about it. Then one of [William's] cronies made a stupid remark about making miracles happen. It made me angry that someone could have that much cruelty and not even feel the least bit guilty about it. I felt enraged at William and at the people who actually supported him for it and I still feel that fury today. It was frustrating that I couldn't do anything about it. I will never understand why some people can be so thoughtless and cruel." Not only is Sarah enraged when she is teased, but when it happens to others she empathizes to the extent that it causes rage to well up inside of her, in defence of the victim. This desire to get behind the marginalized was re-emphasized in a subsequent piece of homework, where Sarah cited "being teased unjustly, seeing friends teased unjustly, and bullying in general, whether at me or someone else" were things that zapped her of her positive energy.

### **Pain**

Sarah cried in my presence several times, both after class, and during interviews. In one tearful moment, she expressed her pain in these words: "Why do boys have to be mean to me? What is it about me? Why? What have I ever done to them? Maybe I'm just a rotten person who doesn't deserve anything!....It's not fair! They should be the ones crying and being miserable! They don't deserve to be happy." Her pain is very real and very deep. She suffers at the hands of both male and female classmates. She does have a handful of friends at school, but her very strong opinions and confrontational disposition may make it difficult to for friends to stay loyal to Sarah.

### **A Supportive Family & a Positive Self-Concept**

Sarah is the youngest of four children and the only child still living at home. Her parents appear to be very supportive of her,

and it would seem that Sarah has begun to talk with her mom and older sister at length about the problems she experiences at school. If she was ever in trouble, or had a really big problem, Sarah mentioned that she would go to her sister to talk about it. Having significant supports in one's life is critical for any youth. For Sarah, the support of her family, and in particular these women, help her to cognitively re-appraise situations, and act as a 'voice of reason' for her.

One factor that can potentially put some youth at risk is their inability to positively fill their leisure time. For those without leisure skills, youth often find themselves getting into trouble (see Nazer-Bloom, 1996). For Sarah this is not an issue. At home she works on her laptop, surfs the internet, watches TV and rides her bike in the park. The fact that Sarah has honed leisure skills is a good distraction for her. She is skilled and talented in many creative arts and had no difficulty thinking of ten things she is good at, which include: "reading, writing stories, drama (acting), photography, singing, bowling, cooking, computer games, computer (internet) research, and movie trivia games." Engaging in these and other activities put Sarah in good stead as they serve not only to fill her time, but can also be used as methods of coping.

Sarah's parents attended a triad conference, where they met with both her teacher Mrs. Smith, and Sarah, for the purpose of discussing Sarah's mid-term progress. This occurred about nine weeks into the intervention. Sarah's parents wanted to discuss Sarah's involvement in the study. Apparently, as a result of the topics being addressed during the intervention, a lot of emotions were coming to the surface that they were having to deal with at home.

Together Sarah and her parents began discussing ‘fitting in,’ not being popular, not fitting into certain styles of clothes, and feeling upset at certain girls. All of these things that were brewing up in Sarah were now becoming topics of conversation at home. Her parents stated that these discussions were causing Sarah some stress. During the interview Mrs. Smith asserted, “This is life! Sarah needs to deal with these issues!” Mrs. Smith told Sarah’s parents that Sarah was working well in the groups during classtime, and that Sarah was presenting her work at the front of the class, and doing a great job. “Sarah lit up at this comment,” Mrs. Smith later shared.

The dialogue occurring in Sarah’s home as a result of the topics discussed during classtime really encouraged me. Any student who believes something covered at school is significant enough to share at home shows that the content is having some impact. The dialogue that continued at home with Sarah’s parents and sister demonstrates that Sarah is putting into practice some of the positive coping techniques discussed during our time together. Even though talking about issues relating to mean girls, bullies and popularity cause stress for Sarah, she was being equipped to learn how to cope with this stress during classtime, giving these skills a personally meaningful context for her. It is scary to think about how students would cope with this type of bullying without family support in place.

The support of Sarah’s parents definitely enhances Sarah’s self-concept. In one homework assignment I asked students to write about a time they experienced a strong emotion, and how they channelled the energy yielded from that emotion and put it into something positive. Sarah shared, “The best positive energy I remember happened when I was celebrating my birthday party. I decided to have a murder mystery and I

planned the whole thing myself. I bought a Murder Mystery game at Wal-Mart, made an invitation list and decided everyone’s parts. It was the best party I ever had because my friends and I got to act out parts and forget who we were. We laughed together as we discovered who we were married to and what kind of mischief we were all up to. It was great fun.” Sarah’s parents appear to go to great lengths to support their daughter, not only in academic pursuits, but socially as well. This sort of support will serve to continue to enhance Sarah’s positive self-concept.

### **Effectiveness of the Intervention for Sarah**

Right from the start of the intervention, Sarah was not too self-conscious to allow herself to get into the relaxation exercises during classtime. As a result, she appeared to really benefit from them. One day Sarah came in late to class, and had missed the relaxation portion of our lesson, but still wanted to do it. She and Mrs. Adams went into another room, and started Sarah’s day out with relaxing. Mrs. Adams later shared that she and Sarah had made a routine of starting each day with a relaxation session. Mrs. Adams felt that it started the day out on a positive note for Sarah, and helped them both to cope better later on in the day. As a facilitator, seeing students use the skills they have been taught, as well as witnessing them apply these skills in a variety of contexts was very heartening.

During classtime we discussed positive and negative self-talk, and how people sometimes speak to themselves in ways far worse than others would ever speak to them. We went on to discuss how negative self-talk affects our attitude about ourselves, and that it is a better to speak to ourselves positively, since positive self-talk is more helpful and less defeating. In a written piece

of work, Sarah shared examples of when she speaks negatively to herself, and offered solid suggestions regarding how to change the negative thoughts into more positive ones. “Sometimes I think there must be something wrong with me if my opinions are different from my friends.” She also shared, “Sometimes I tell myself I am not very stylish when I see the clothes some of my friends are wearing.” To counter these unhelpful thoughts, Sarah said that she would, “try very hard to tell myself that my friends are entitled to their opinions, even though they are different from mine.” Regarding the clothing, Sarah observed, “when I look carefully, I realized [their clothes] are often from the same stores I get my clothes. I tell myself I look just fine.”

Sarah is very self-aware, and has developed a very good sense of that which makes her feel angry, including: bullies, deleting computer work, boys who don’t listen when adults lecture about bullying, friends who don’t listen to her, going to school, getting picked on, seeing other people being treated unfairly, and interruptions while working. Even more impressive is Sarah’s ability to identify what cues her body is giving her when she is beginning to feel angry. Many students were unable to identify any physiological or psychological changes occurring in their bodies when anger sweeps over them. This level of self-awareness could be very helpful for Sarah to learn to get a better handle on her anger. “Increased breathing, a hot throat, a sudden urge to punch someone, a hot stomach, and tense muscles” were physiological and psychological responses Sarah experiences in response to anger. However, recognizing these anger cues early on in the fight or flight response, and then making a decision to respond positively will be very important for Sarah. Coping in the heat of anger was rehearsed during classtime, but it will be up

to Sarah to make a conscious decision to take a deep breath and a step back, when she begins to recognize the cues her mind and body are giving her, when the anger begins to build.

It would appear by Sarah’s list of things she does to cope with anger, that she has a good handle on how to control her anger, as she lists: a) listening to music, b) inhaling and exhaling, c) reading, d) day dreaming, e) writing stories, f) writing songs, g) doodling, and h) exercising. Her list was the most comprehensive of all her peers. In the same way that Sarah needs to practice taking a deep breath and a step back when she realizes that anger is rising in her, she also needs to rehearse these strategies for coping with anger, before she unleashes her fury on others. By taking the time and creating the space between herself and others, she will increase the likelihood that she will cope with her anger more positively.

Overall, I believe that the intervention was very successful for Sarah. During our time together, Sarah identified what makes her feel stressed, and what she does to cope. She has recognized exercise as a good way to help her get rid of anger, by jumping on her trampoline or riding her bike. She has begun to talk about the pain that she has lived with, and is developing some skills for coping with anger. The dialogue that has been occurring at home as a result of the intervention is a very positive sign that her parents are being made aware of the difficulties that Sarah experiences at school. Daily rehearsal of the relaxation skills will help Sarah to automate deep breathing and relaxation, as a response to stress and anger. Automating a relaxation response in the face of anger or stress would be a healthy way for Sarah to cope.

## **Sarah's Monologue**

At the end of our twelve weeks together, students were asked to write a poem, song, story, rap, act out a skit, share favourite song lyrics or something along that line, to present to the class what they had learned during our time together. When Sarah was called, she approached the front of the class, and launched into the following monologue off the top of her head. It was apparent that these thoughts had been brewing in her mind for a long time. Notably, her performance was met with crossed arms, rolled eyes and “tisks” from some of her female peers.

## **Popularity**

Popularity. Has anyone noticed it has the word “pop” in it, as in soda pop? It looks great and tastes great, but you have to add things, to make it good. In the end, it's just artificial flavouring and colouring. There are girls who have it all: fantastic clothes, amazing make-up; guys just love them and are willing to lose every shred of dignity for them. These are the type of girls a lot of people look up to, but I wonder what these popular girls would be like if we got to know them better? You might get off lucky and find a girl who is both pretty and nice, but other girls can be manipulative and downright nasty. Sadly, people don't look beyond that; the good looks are all you see and all you're going to get. There are some girls who are so fascinated by this, they're willing to use any means to become popular. Some decide to get popular at any cost, even if it means dumping your best friend. I must ask this: How is ditching your best friend supposed to get people to think you're “cool?” Will it win over respect? Or will it just get you feared and possibly hated? Their popularity earns them fear, power and hatred. I wonder if it is all really worth it?<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Sarah later typed out and shared her monologue with me. This is nearly verbatim of what she recited to her peers.



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