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Girlie-Girls, Tomboys, and Everything in Between: The Messages Girls are Receiving and Sending About their Place in an Urban Elementary School Classroom

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Introduction

It has been well documented within the education world that girls' confidence, self-esteem, and academic achievement begin to taper off during early adolescence. In the early 1990s the American Association of University Women completed a groundbreaking study showing that between the ages of nine and fifteen, girls experience a drastic drop in self-esteem. This is even more pronounced amongst Latina girls, whose self esteem dropped as much as 38% during their middle school years according to the study (AAUW 1992). This drop in self-esteem can result in lower academic performance as well as higher teen pregnancy rates, especially amongst working-class urban girls. The study also reported that more research needs to be done focusing on the differences of "sex, race and ethnicity, and socioeconomic status" (AAUW 1992: 4).

In Hartford in particular there are 11,877 Latino students enrolled in public education, or 53.3% of the total enrollment, and in 2004-2005 66.6 percent of students district-wide were eligible for free/reduced-price meals (Strategic School Profile). Since Hartford's schools have a significant population of low-income Latinos, it seems appropriate to examine the experiences of Latina girls in Hartford's classrooms. By focusing on low-income Latina girls in an inner-city urban classroom, my research will help to gain a further understanding of how race, class and socioeconomic status intersect to affect young girls and their educational outcomes. However, rather than focusing on high school age students, there needs to be a shift down to studying these factors in younger students, as so little research has been done on this age group.

Therefore, I set out to answer the following question: how are gender and gender relations constructed both officially (through programs and policies), and informally

(through social interactions), for pre-adolescent Latino youth in a fifth grade classroom? Specifically, how do female students perceive these gender relations, and how does this affect their developing self esteem and academic performance? By spending time in one dual-language Spanish-English classroom, I focused on the messages that are being sent *to* the girls and what messages *they* are sending to each other in terms of what is expected of their gender roles.

My research has shown that *official* classroom policies send the message that girls and boys are inherently different. On the *informal* level, the teacher unknowingly sends two powerful messages to students: 1) girls are automatically considered "helpers;" and 2) boys are strong, implying that girls are weak. Girls accept as well as reject some of these messages. In addition, girls send messages *to each other*. These girls seem to collectively agree that it is best to be a "normal girl"—one who actively rejects constraining notions of girlhood such as "tomboy" and "girlie-girl" and instead allows herself to move between these categories. The ideal of being a "normal girl" allows them to adopt characteristics from both extremes in an effort to construct their own definitions of "being a girl." Inherent in this fluidity is a belief that they can do anything, reflecting a high self-esteem. However, regardless of where they fall in the spectrum, they believe that appearance is paramount to being a girl.

Literature Review

Several scholarly works have helped to inform my thinking throughout the process of both researching and writing. Since the AAUW's groundbreaking report first came out in 1992, there have been a number of studies done to try to shed light on girls and gender inequality in schools.

The findings from the Executive Summary of *How Schools Shortchange Girls* reveal that not only do "girls receive significantly less attention from classroom teachers than do boys," but also that they "do not emerge from our schools with the same degree of confidence and self-esteem as boys" (AAUW 1992: 2). Not surprisingly, low-income minority girls face even more severe obstacles, and yet the study reports that "too little information is available on differences among various groups of girls" (AAUW 1992: 4). Therefore, as previously mentioned, they recommend that more research be done focusing on "sex, race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic status." My research will help to eliminate this current lack of research on these factors relating to younger girls.

Most of the other studies focusing on gender and gender relations have concerned either high school or middle school age girls, such as Lopez (2003). In her study, she investigates race(ing) and gender(ing) processes in the high school setting among predominately Latino students in New York City, and found that both the formal and institutional practices within schools 'race' and 'gender' students in ways that significantly affect their future outlooks on education. Although she focuses on older students, I find her research to be particularly useful because she outlines a "race-gender experience framework" that proves useful for my own research (Lopez 2003: 6). This framework consists of two concepts: the race-gender experience, which comprises the informal and formal institutional practices such as social interactions and the enforcement of rules and policies; and the race-gender outlooks, which are "life perspectives and attitudes about how social mobility is attained" (Lopez 2003: 6). I have expanded on this approach in my own research by shifting the focus down to an upper elementary level to see how their race-gender framework forms at a younger level.

Orenstein's (1994) study has come the closest to my own investigation by illustrating the plunge in self-esteem experienced by adolescent girls that was documented in the AAUW study. She spent a year observing African American, Latina and Caucasian girls in the eighth grade at two different economically and racially diverse California schools, and her findings confirmed the AAUW study. My research expands on Orenstein's because I looked at a school in a different local context on the other side of the country in Hartford, CT, and I also focused specifically on Latinas.

Eder's (1995) look at the language use of middle school students is another ethnography that proved useful to me in my own research. In her study, she examines the nature and construction of gender roles and gender inequality, and finds that "language becomes the basis for maintaining power differences between males and females as well as for providing creative opportunities to challenge limiting gender roles" (Eder 1995: 4). She notes that "Forms of talk such as gossip, teasing and insulting allow [students] to collectively create various notions of what it means to be male or female" (Eder 1995: 2). One of the important categories that I studied in my own research was language use. Therefore, Eder provides a rationale for my examination. However, Eder studied predominately Euro-American students, so I expanded on her idea of language by looking at Latinos and language.

Finally, Barrie Thorne's *Gender Play* (1993), which looks at fourth and fifth graders in a working-class community, was very useful to me. She argues that the organization and meaning of gender are influenced by a variety of factors, including age, ethnicity, race, and social class, and that they shift with social context. This was a useful concept to keep in mind while doing my own research on children of the same age.

Methodology

I utilized ethnographic research methods for this project. This involved a combination of participant-observation fieldwork in a fifth-grade classroom, including many informal conversations with both the teacher and students; one formal interview each with the teacher, vice principal, and four female students; and three after-school focus groups with four female students. I observed one fifth grade classroom twice a week (for approximately four hours per session), for about ten weeks starting in the last week of September.

My time spent in the classroom was much more participatory than passive, and I tried to take an active role in getting to know all of the students by answering their questions, teaching and helping small groups with science and social studies projects, etc., and they began to consider me a regular addition to their classroom, even coming to me when they had issues with friends. This gave me a good vantage point in which to study their interactions in depth. I looked for two main categories of data during my observations: first, the interactions between the students and the teacher, and second, the interactions between students. Within the first category I paid particular attention to things such as punishment/discipline, language, and the amount and quality of attention given to girls vs. boys by the teacher. Within the second category, I focused on interactions between girls, and between the two genders, looking especially at how they relate to one another, converse with each other, and talk about each other. I also had several opportunities to see the students interacting outside of their main classroom during lunch, music and gym classes.

The formal interviews and focus groups comprised the second major part of my research. I first obtained informed consent from all informants, and took special pains to write a letter in both English and Spanish to the parents/guardians to explain my research purposes, as the girls were minors and could not give their own permission. I also assured everyone involved that I would be using pseudonyms to protect their identity, as well as the school's identity. As an incentive, I promised the girls that they would get a brand new book if they participated in the focus groups or interviews, thanks to a small grant that I received to complete my research. For ethical reasons I only allowed those girls who returned the written permission forms to participate in my research, even though this left at least one girl upset.

In the end I conducted three focus groups with the same group of four girls, and interviewed three out of four of them individually, as well as a fourth girl who did not participate in the focus groups (but had written permission to be interviewed). Some examples of questions I asked the female students in both the individual interviews and the focus groups include: What is your favorite/least favorite part about being a girl? Do you think that boys and girls are different? If yes, how? How are girls expected or "supposed to" act? Is this different than how boys are expected to act? Do you ever feel like your teacher treats boys and girls differently? How? How do you feel about school?

The focus groups also included several activities. For example, I gave students a list of various jobs (such as teacher, fire fighter, police officer, secretary, etc), and asked them to independently decide whether each was a job for a woman, a man, or both. Then as a group we discussed why they chose the categories they did. Another activity was to have each student "go back in time." I asked them to imagine living their lives in reverse,

until they got to the moment of their birth, and then they had to imagine reliving their lives as boys instead of girls. I asked them to make individual lists of everything that would be different in their lives if they were boys, and we had a group discussion about what they wrote. While the conversations went well when I asked them specific questions similar to those in their individual interviews, the activities did not work nearly as well as I had hoped, as the girls did not seem to take them too seriously.

Context: Connecting the Community to the Classroom

Since schools are a reflection of the communities that they serve, it is important to first get a feel for the surrounding neighborhood. For this reason, I took a leisurely stroll through part of the block group in the census tract where Miller is located on a Sunday afternoon in early April 2006 while doing research for another project in the same school, to get a feel for the community in which these students live.

Several minutes into my walk, it became immediately clear to me (through the curious stares and honking horns) that as a young white woman I was unable to blend into the fabric of the community, as everyone I passed took notice of me.

This immediate feeling of being an outsider, just several blocks away from my college, points to an extreme lack of racial diversity within the Behind the Rocks community. Out of a total population of 8,061 for the entire Behind the Rocks neighborhood, 64.8% are Hispanic, and 18.1% are black non-Hispanic (Hartfordinfo.org). For the specific census tract surrounding the school, 2,901 out of a total population of 4,415 are Hispanic or Latino, with the largest group identifying as Puerto Rican, with 2,534 or 57.4% (US Census 2000).

That last statistic explains the ubiquitous Puerto Rican flags that are proudly displayed everywhere within the community. In my walk I noticed flags hanging off of multi-family houses, displayed in cars, and painted on a large mural on the side of a bodega. I couldn't help but compare this to my own town on suburban Long Island, with its American flags proudly displayed on people's porches, and also as bumper stickers on their cars. Interestingly, I did not see a single American flag or "support our troops" sign anywhere in Behind the Rocks. Clearly this community considers itself Puerto Rican first, and American second.

The Behind the Rocks neighborhood is thus named due to its location behind the rocks at the base of the hill where Trinity is located. Trinity is clearly visible on its hill among at least the first few blocks of this neighborhood, serving as a constant reminder of the attainment of higher education for the community. With two elementary schools located within a block of each other, and the neighborhood being within the shadow of a college, one would think that education is a strong value within the Behind the Rocks neighborhood. In fact, the only social services organizations within the entire neighborhood are three elementary schools (Hartfordinfo.org). However, the educational attainment statistics suggest a mismatch between possible community values and actual educational outcomes. Of the population 25 years and over within the census tract 5049 immediately surrounding Miller, only 53% are high school graduates or higher, compared to 80.4% of the entire U.S. population (US Census 2000). For the entire Behind the Rocks neighborhood, 20.7% of the population aged 16-19 are not in school and have no high school degree (Hartfordinfo.org). This has actually decreased since 1980, when 31.1% were not in school (Hartfordinfo.org). In the population over 25 years of age, 32%

have a high school diploma but no college, and only 9.9% of the over 25 population has an associates, Bachelors, graduate, or professional degree (Hartfordinfo.org).

It comes as no surprise then that the median household income for census tract 5049 in 1999 was $29,758, and that the poverty rate for the neighborhood in 2000 was 24.1 (US Census 2000; Hartfordinfo.org). 32.6% of children under 18 were living in poverty as of 2000, and the poverty rate was highest among Hispanics at 28.9 (Hartfordinfo.org). Only 34.7% of housing units are owner occupied, while a whopping 62.6% are renter-occupied (US Census 2000).

From my walk I got the sense that security was very important to people in the Behind the Rocks neighborhood. I also could not help but notice the multitude of signs displayed on both single-family and multi-family houses, apartment buildings, and the several stores that were warnings to potential undesirables. These signs included countless home security signs, “private property” and “no loitering” signs, “Block Watch Protected,” “no trespassing,” and “Private Property, Police Take Notice” signs. To an outsider, these signs suggested that the community was diligent about protecting itself from harm, and yet they seemed to contribute to my feeling of unease. These signs pointed to a presence of danger that the neighborhood is trying to keep out.

I observed several groups of young teenagers strolling through the neighborhood, congregating on a street corner, and slowly riding their bikes. Some older teens or young adults were leaning against a parked car, just talking. Adults who were outside seemed to either be doing yard work, or, when socializing, sitting on the many different levels of front porches attached to the multi-family homes. A combination of Spanish and English

was being spoken by everyone, although the adults tended to favor speaking in Spanish more so than English.

As can be seen by the above description, Miller serves a predominately Latino community. Considered an inner-city public school, Miller serves children from the community in grades PK-7, and is 97% minority, with 79.3% of its' students labeled as Hispanic (Strategic School Profile). 66.6% of those students speak a language other than English at home (Strategic School Profile).

The school itself is actually two buildings joined together—a much older building that used to be a high school, and a relatively recent addition, which is where the main entrance is. A concrete inner courtyard houses a modest playground in the interior of the buildings. The main sign out in front of the school welcomes people in both English and Spanish. Visitors must press a buzzer to gain entry to the school, and once inside, one must walk up an extremely colorful staircase to the second floor where Mrs. Gonzalez's fifth grade dual-language classroom is located. The hallways are decorated with large charts and graphs plotting students' SFA and CMT scores, and peppy little slogans encouraging children to do well on their tests—a rather odd choice of décor, emphasizing an obsession with testing.

Inside Mrs. Gonzalez's class desks are arranged into clusters of four, to promote group work and learning. There is a large table in the back of the classroom to accommodate Vanessa, a severely handicapped and wheelchair-bound student. She also has her own special aide to assist her with an individualized curriculum. Various areas of the walls are decorated into different stations—math, Spanish vocabulary, Success For All (SFA), writing skills, etc. Some colorful world maps crayoned by the students are on

the back wall, alongside a variety of construction paper booklets that the SFA class has created about a story they have read. Several shoeboxes that have been transformed into models of our planetary system are displayed in front of a window next to the teacher's desk.

As long as the children are in the classroom there is always a buzz of activity, and the room is never completely silent. During the two months or so that I was a part of the class, there were some fluctuations in the class composition. When I began my research there were 16 students in the class, ten girls and six boys. However, during the course of two months, two girls left, a boy and girl arrived from Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic, respectively, and in my final week of research the same boy left again. When my research ended there were a total of nine girls and five boys in the class. Within that group were five "newcomers,"—children who had just recently moved here from Latin American countries, and spoke no English.

The children seem to have a good relationship with their teacher, characterized by mutual respect. They are clearly much more well-behaved than students in a few other classes, some of who are constantly seen running through the halls and causing general disturbances. Both English as well as Spanish can be heard from both the students and the teacher, as this is the only fifth grade classroom in the school's dual-language program. Dual-language programs use what is known as the fifty-fifty model, meaning that half of the class instruction is in English, while the other half is in Spanish. This particular class breaks it down by week, so that one week will be "Spanish Week," while the next is "English Week." However, due to certain curriculum demands, it is more common to hear both languages on a daily basis. The overall goal of the program is for

all students to be fluent and literate in both languages. Although my Spanish skills are minimal, I was still able to understand everything that was going on in the classroom because the teacher and students would speak slowly enough for me to understand the gist of what was being said. And although I made it a point to tell them not to switch to English just because I was there, both Mrs. Gonzalez and the students frequently translated for me when I looked confused.

Analysis and Interpretation

Messages Sent To the Girls

Although the teachers and students are consciously unaware of it, my research found that loud messages are being sent to students on both the "official" level of classroom policies, as well as on the "informal" level of teacher/student interactions. While I originally wanted to examine the health curriculum and sex education programs at the school, I was unfortunately unable to do so since the students only had a health lesson once a week, which conflicted with my own schedule. I did ask the vice principal about any programs relating to gender issues, but was unable to gain a good understanding of the programs themselves without actually seeing the lessons being taught, as well as getting a hold of any materials.

However, my observations did show that messages are being sent to girls through classroom policies in both their main class as well as gym class. One classroom policy that I consistently observed every time the class walked in the hallway was a separate and distinct girls' line and boys' line. This policy extended especially to the lunchtime procedure, as the following excerpt from my field notes illustrates:

> While walking downstairs to lunch, (in two separate girls' and boys' lines), Mrs. Gonzalez turns to the group and asks "I can't remember, who goes first today?"

> The kids reply that it's the girls' turn, since the boys went first yesterday. When we got downstairs to the actual lunch line I realized that the class apparently has a policy where one day the girls get to go first on the lunch line, and the next day it switches, so that both boys and girls are able to get their lunches first, depending on the day.[1]

Curious about this policy, I asked Mrs. Gonzalez why she chooses to institute separate boys and girls lines in her class. She responded,

> I have boys' lines and girls' lines because I like to supervise my class, and if I do one single line the line is very long and I can't see them all at once, so I make them boys' and girls' lines so they're shorter. And I always walk behind the lines, rather than in the front, so I can see from the last one to the first one. I could do it different ways, mixing it up. But you know, sometimes it's faster.[2]

This suggests that Mrs. Gonzalez is unaware that she is sending any message to her students, and believes that separating the class by gender is an innocuous practice used for sorting purposes only. While her intentions are clearly innocent, this practice of separating by gender does send the message to both girls and boys that they are inherently different. As Mrs. Gonzalez says, she could mix them up in any number of ways, such as assigning random numbers, or even making the children line up alphabetically in two lines, and yet she automatically has them line up by gender. Interestingly, the girls seem to accept this message, because when I specifically asked them why they thought there were always two separate lines, they all agreed that they did not know, "it's just the way it is."

A second classroom policy that inadvertently sends girls the message that boys and girls are inherently different occurs every Wednesday during gym class. During the first gym class that I sat in on, I asked the female gym teacher if the class was always coed, since I noticed that both girls and boys participated in the activities together. She

[1] Field Notes, October 4, 2006
[2] Interview, Mrs. Gonzalez, November 8, 2006

responded, "yeah they do everything together, even swimming is coed."[3] However, on every subsequent Wednesday I noticed a pattern occurring. Part of the warm-ups involved running several laps around the perimeter of the gymnasium, and inevitably one of the three gym teachers would call the girls to sit in a circle in the middle of the gym while the boys ran laps, and then have them switch, so that the girls could run laps. On the outset this again seems like an innocuous sorting practice, to make it easier to keep track of the students as they complete their warm-up tasks. However, by having the girls sit and wait while watching the boys run, this policy is sending the message that boys are wilder, rougher, stronger, and faster than girls, and that the girls have to be protected because they are more fragile and slower. The girls seem to accept this message, since I never once heard them complain about the policy, and on many occasions they told me both in individual interviews as well as in the focus groups that boys "play rougher."

Overall there have been two prominent messages on the informal level that the teacher seems to be unknowingly sending to students concerning gender expectations. The first message is that girls are "helpers." This message is sent to girls in both their regular classroom and in their "specials." During my observations I have noticed that frequently when handing things out such as papers or calculators, the teacher will either ask for a volunteer to pass the items out, or many times just hand the papers to an individual and ask the student to distribute them to the class. The following example from my first day's field notes is representative of a pattern I have seen occurring on a daily basis in the classroom:

> After lunch, several students are still finishing up their math tests, while the rest sit quietly in their seats independently reading. Mrs. Gonzalez approaches Ashley, who appears to be somewhat of a tomboy, and asks her to deliver a stack of

[3] Field Notes, October 4, 2006

> papers to the fourth grade. When she gets back from delivering the papers down the hall, Mrs. Gonzalez then asks her to collect the finished tests from the other students. Why did she choose Ashley to do both errands when there were at least seven or eight other students who were also done with their tests and reading silently?[4]

This pattern of asking specific students—always girls—to run errands or collect or distribute papers seems to happen at least once during every day I have been observing the classroom. Out of the approximately two months I spent in the classroom, I only recall three or four times in my field notes when the teacher specifically asked a male student to help her. It is also interesting to note that even when the teacher asks for volunteers it is typically the female students who raise their hands. One would think that the teacher would try to encourage all students to help, especially because in her interview she stated, "if I say I need volunteers, usually the same students volunteer because they are leaders. There is always another that wants to participate but they are shy."[5] Therefore, it would follow that Mrs. Gonzalez would specifically ask male students to help her when she asks individuals. However, she always asks the girls. The message is being sent loud and clear that girls are expected to be the helpers, and thus are being conditioned to be. Girls seem to readily accept this, since they actively volunteer to help the teacher all the time, and occasionally get visibly disappointed when the teacher chooses another student to help, or decides to hand something out by herself.

The only time this "girls as helpers" message is different is when heavy objects are involved, in which case only boys are asked to help. These occasions send the message that boys are strong, which implies that girls are weak. Two memorable

[4] Field Notes, September 29, 2006
[5] Interview, Mrs. Gonzalaz, November 8, 2006

instances of this occurred during my observations. In the first example, I had just arrived in the classroom at the beginning of a social studies lesson.

> As I settle down at the teacher's desk to start observing, Mrs. Gonzalez instructs the class to take out their social studies textbooks. Not wanting me to feel left out, she says "Kevin, go get Miss Wagner a textbook in English please." Kevin complies and searches through the piles of heavy textbooks on the other side of the room, and carries the heavy book over to my desk.[6]

This incident suggests that when it comes to lifting heavy objects, Mrs. Gonzalez only chooses boys, because girls are thought to be weaker. This was only one of a handful of incidents in which boys were specifically chosen over girls, and the girls were not happy about their teacher's choice. Kevin originally had some difficulty finding a textbook for me in English, since most of the spare books were in Spanish. Two girls saw Kevin's difficulty, and immediately asked the teacher if they could find the book for me instead. She of course said no. However, this shows that girls are resisting this message, recognizing that they are capable of lifting heavy books too.

The second incident that sent this message occurred at the end of music class one day, when the music teacher needed help carrying several large (and presumably heavy), musical instruments to her car. Mrs. Gonzalez had already arrived to bring the class back to their room, and so the music teacher asked her if she could borrow five students to help her. Although it was evident that several girls wanted to help, (since helping is what they have been told their role is), Mrs. Gonzalez chose five male students. This provoked some frustration from several girls as they lined up to leave the music room, as I heard several comments such as "That's not fair!" and "girls have equally the same power!"[7] This rejection of the message that boys are stronger was also seen during one of the focus

[6] Field Notes, November 1, 2006
[7] Field Notes, Novermber 17, 2006

groups as well, when I asked the girls whether they think their teacher treats boys and girls differently. Adriana stated,

> I actually think she doesn't treat us equally, cause when she sends the boys to bring up packs of books. And girls are equal as boys, and I think girls can do it too! It's not that I think boys can't do it, I know boys can do it, but I think girls can do it too, it's not only the boys.[8]

This comment was representative of what all the other girls said, and suggests that girls reject the message that they are weaker than boys, since they are saying that "girls can do it too.

Messages Girls Send to Each Other:
"I'm not a girlie-girl, but I'm not a tomboy either"

Girls are not only passive receivers of messages. In fact, they send messages to each other too about how girls should behave. Overall, the theme that I have observed is that the girls believe there are multiple ways of being a girl, and they are sending messages to each other to actively reject being narrowly labeled. They are embracing a fluidity that allows them to pick and choose how they want to behave. The following quote from Diane, who just turned twelve, illustrates this pattern very nicely:

> Being a girlie-girl isn't a good thing. They don't pay attention in school. I don't consider myself to be a girlie-girl. I used to be a girlie-girl, but when I saw my report card I was like, what's this? I used to get good grades, what's wrong? And one day I was thinking to myself, I know what it is, I'm concentrating too much on other people and not on myself, so I stopped saying that I'm pretty and stuff, cause I know I'm pretty but I don't have to say it to the whole world. I still bring my purse and stuff, but I'm not 100% always talking about my hair and stuff now.[9]

This quote suggests that Diane is rejecting the notion of being a pure girlie-girl, because she believes that girlie-girls are self-absorbed social butterflies, which takes their attention away from doing well in school. Diane obviously values the importance of

[8] Focus Group, November 17, 2006
[9] Interview, December 1, 2006

doing well in school, otherwise she would not have changed her behavior so drastically. However, she says that she changed, but acknowledges that she still brings her purse to school and talks about her hair sometimes. This shows that she can retain characteristics of being a girlie-girl, while also being what they refer to as a "normal girl," who does well in school. It is also important to point out that appearance still plays a major role for Diane, even though she says that she is not a girlie-girl.

The same themes are also seen in the following exchange that occurred during one of the focus groups:

> **Jennifer:** Girlie-girls are like 'oh my god! I just broke a nail! Oh no! my hair is all messed up! I'm not a girlie-girl, but I'm not a tomboy either. I'm a normal girl.
> **Everyone:** Yeah, we're normal.
> **Me:** What's a normal girl?
> **Michelle:** Some of the time she worries about what people wear, and she can be into fashion and dancing and stuff, but she can also play soccer and volleyball and basketball. She can do whatever she wants.[10]

This suggests the same themes. Jennifer's definition of a girlie-girl suggests a distain and a belief that girlie-girls only care about appearance and superficial things. The fact that all of the girls agree that they're "normal" is also interesting, because the use of the word "normal" suggests that this is how all girls are supposed to be. They are sending a message to each other that being able to choose from a combination of girlie-girl and tomboy behaviors is how girls are supposed to be. This suggests a recognition of the fact that some girls lean more to the girlie-girl side, and others more towards the tomboy side, but that they should all have some sort of mixture of both in them, which makes them "normal girls." Also, the fact that Michelle states a normal girl "can do whatever she

[10] Focus Group, November 15, 2006

wants" seems to suggest that normal girls have a high self-esteem, because they are asserting themselves and creating their own definitions of being a girl.

A third piece of evidence that illustrates these themes and patterns occurred in the classroom while working on group projects:

> While I was walking around helping kids with their social studies projects on Puerto Rico, I noticed Julie whip out some nail glue, and proceed to fix Jennifer's fake nails, which apparently had been falling off. Diane looked over at the two girls and exclaimed "oh my god, you girls are such girlie-girls!" Jennifer shot back "No we're not!" and Julie retorted (to Diane), "maybe *you* are, but *I'm* not."[11]

This exchange suggests once again that the girls are allowing themselves to explore a range of behaviors, while rejecting being narrowly labeled. It is also interesting to note that the term "girlie-girl" is being used in a pejorative way in this exchange, which is why the girls flatly deny that they are girlie-girls, even while engaging in girlie-girl behavior. Furthermore, it is extremely interesting to note that Jennifer is the one with the fake nails, which is especially significant since she was the girl who explained to me that she was not a girlie-girl, and that girlie-girls "are like 'oh my god! I just broke a nail!" She clearly regards herself as a normal girl, and while this particular instance shows her behaving in a way associated with girlie-girls, it just shows that she exhibits a mix somewhere between the two extremes of tomboy and girlie-girl, as do the rest of the girls in this class.

Keeping Up Appearances

The high importance placed on appearance is illustrated in all three pieces of evidence discussed above. However, since it seemed like girls were always talking about how they look, I felt it warranted a separate section to give it further emphasis. Overall, I

[11] Field Notes, November 29, 2006

found that for these fifth graders, personal appearance is a key aspect of being a girl. During both the individual interviews as well as in the focus group, I asked girls to talk about their favorite part of being a girl. Each girl overwhelmingly talked about hair, clothing, or a combination thereof. For example, one girl told me "I like brushing my hair, and making curls on them, and dressing up."[12]

I also asked them questions about differences between girls and boys. In response to my question "aside from physical differences, do you think that boys and girls are different," the girls all gave variations of the same answer, which was "we get to wear a lot of things, and they get to wear only pants and shorts. And their hair is shorter too."[13] I found it interesting that the girls immediately talked about obvious superficial differences, rather than first mentioning behavioral differences. This shows that for them, clothing and hair are both very important aspects of being a girl, and are a salient indicator of who they are.

Conclusion:

In summary, girls in Mrs. Gonzalez's class are having messages sent to them, as well as sending messages to each other. In terms of the messages sent *to* the girls, some official classroom policies send the message that girls and boys are inherently different, and girls seem to accept this message as natural. Mrs. Gonzalez also unknowingly sends two messages to her students: 1) girls are "helpers;" and 2) boys are strong, and girls are weak. Girls strongly accept the first message, while they vehemently reject the second. Additionally, girls are sending messages to each other. They collectively agree that being a "normal" girl is best, and that there is a variation within the range of what normal

[12] Interview, November 11, 2006
[13] Focus Group, November 15, 2006

constitutes. In terms of self-esteem and academic achievement, it appears that girls who consider themselves "normal" have a relatively high self-esteem, and appreciate the importance of doing well in school. Furthermore, appearance is seen as a central component of being a girl, regardless of where they fall in the spectrum of "being a girl."

It would be very interesting to do a follow-up study with the girls in this class when they reach ninth grade, to see if these findings still hold true, or to see if they did indeed fall prey to the plunge in confidence documented by the American Association of University Women.

I encourage teachers in all grades to have formal discussions with their students about gender roles and breaking down gender stereotypes, which is unfortunately something I have not seen happening at all, because it is important to continue the positive feelings that these particular fifth graders currently have into their middle and high school years and beyond.

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Appendix

List of Interview Questions for Vice Principal:

1) What types of programs/curriculums does Miller offer that deal with issues of gender?

2) What type of health/sex ed curriculum does the school offer?

3) Does Miller have a sexual harassment policy? Have you ever dealt with students who have violated it? How did you deal with it?

4) How often do issues relating to gender seem to come up for you in dealing with students?

5) Research has suggested that between the ages of 9-15, girls experience a drastic drop in self-esteem, confidence, and academic performance, and studies suggest that this is even more pronounced among Latina girls. Drawing on your many years of experience working with girls in this age range, how do you feel about that?

6) How do you think schools and teachers should go about building confidence and self-esteem among their students, especially girls?

List of Interview Questions for Classroom Teacher:

1) How conscious are you of different gender issues in your classroom?

2) When your students are working in groups, do you ever notice any differences in the roles that are taken by girls within the groups?

3) Do you ever notice any differences in how you might treat boys and girls, for example, in disciplining them, or how often you call on them or give them attention, or just the type of language you use to talk with them?

4) I've noticed in all the classes that are walking in the halls, there's always a specific boys line and a specific girls lines. Why?

5) Thinking about the girls in your current class and girls you've had in years past, has low self esteem been a prominent issue for them, have they had any issues with that?

6) Academically, how do males an females compare in your class?

List of Interview Questions for Girls:

1) Age
2) Where were you born? If in another country, when did you come here?

3) Describe your family for me. Who do you live with?
4) What language do you speak the most at home?
5) Were your parents born in the US?
6) What do your parents do for a living?
7) Talk about your relationship with your siblings

8) What does being a girl mean to you? What does being a Latina mean to you?

9) What is your favorite part about being a girl? Your least favorite part?

10) How are girls expected to or "supposed to" act? Is this different than how boys are expected to act?

11) Aside from physical differences, do you think that boys and girls are different? If yes, how?

12) Are boys and girls friends in your class? How do the boys and girls get along?

13) Is there a social order of kids in your class, like popular kids and unpopular kids? Where do you fall? What about cliques?

14) Describe how girls get along in your class. How do you feel about your friendships with other students?

15) What are some of your hobbies and interests?

16) What do you and your friends do for fun when you hang out?

17) What do you think boys do for fun when they're hanging out?

18) Do you ever feel like your teachers treat boys and girls differently?

19) How do you feel about school? Schoolwork?

20) What's your favorite subject? Why? Whats your least favorite subject? Why?

21) How important is school for you?

22) What defines a good student? How are good students treated by people in your class? Do you think you're a good student?Why?

23) What do you think you're good at? What makes you special and unique?

24) What is a girl who would be considered "cool" like? Do you think you're cool? What about a boy who's cool? What would he be like?

25) What do you want to be when you grow up?

26) what is a girlie-girl? How does she act/behave? What does she do for fun? Are girlie-girls good at school? Is being a girlie-girl a good thing? Do you consider yourself to be a girlie-girl?