





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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Research 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 5th grade classroom?
 - Specifically, how do female students perceive these gender relations, and how does this affect their developing self-esteem and academic performance?
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Background & Significance

- Between 9-15, girls experience a drastic drop in self-esteem, confidence, and academic achievement (AAUW)
 - Even more pronounced among Latina girls
 - more research needs to be done focusing on differences of sex, race and ethnicity, and socioeconomic status (AAUW)
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Background & Significance cont'd

- 11,877 Latino students enrolled in Hartford Public Schools, 53.3% total enrollment*
- 66.6% of students eligible for free/reduced-price lunch in 2004-05*
- By focusing on low-income Latina girls in an inner-city urban classroom, will help gain further understanding of how race, class & SES intersect to affect young girls in schools
- *(Strategic School Profile)

Literature Review

American Association of University Women (1991) *How Schools Shortchange Girls*

Lopez (2003) *Hopeful Girls, Troubled Boys*

- Outlines a “race-gender experience framework”

Orenstein’s (1994) *Schoolgirls: Young Women, Self-Esteem, and the Confidence Gap*

Thorne’s (1994) *Gender Play*

Methodology

➤ Ethnographic research:

- Participant-observation
 - Focus on: interactions between teacher and students, and interactions between students
- Formal interviews
 - Teacher, vice-principal, four female students
- Focus groups
 - Group discussions and activities with group of four girls

Research Context

➤ “Miller” Elementary School

- 97% minority
- 79.3% Hispanic
- grades PK-7
- 66.6% speak a language other than English at home




(Strategic School Profile)

“Mrs. Gonzalez’s” 5th Grade Dual-Language Class

- dual-language = 50/50 model, alternating by week
- Began year with 16 students (10 girls, 6 boys), 2 girls left, boy and girl arrived, boy left. Ended with 9 girls and 5 boys
- 5 “newcomers”
- 1 mainstreamed Female student

Thesis and Findings

- Messages Sent *To* the Girls:
 - *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) boys are strong, implying that girls are weak; and 2) girls are automatically considered “helpers.”
 - Girls accept as well as reject some of these messages.
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Thesis Continued...

- Messages girls send *to each other*:
 - 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.
 - 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.

Findings: Girls Actively Reject Constraining Notions of Girlhood

- Interview:
 - 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.
 - -Diane (12.1.06)

Findings Continued:

➤ Focus Group:

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.

Conclusions and Implications

- Girls think it's best to be a "normal girl"
- "normal girls" show high self-esteem and understand importance of academic achievement
- Encourage teachers to discuss gender roles and break down gender stereotypes up to 12th grade