

CONTEMPORARY GIRLS: UNDERSTANDING THE CONTRADICTORY  
FEMININE DEMANDS IN THE HIGH SCHOOL CLASSROOM

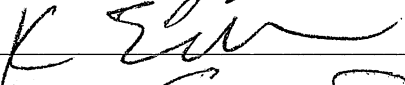
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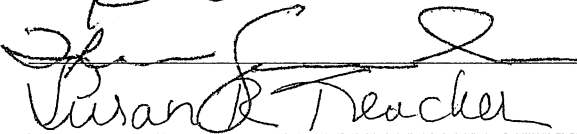
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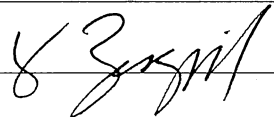


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Contemporary Girls: Understanding The Contradictory Feminine Demands In The High  
School Classroom

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of  
Arts at George Mason University

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## DEDICATION

This research is dedicated to all those girls who were told they would never amount to anything and managed to prove everyone wrong. And to my mother and grandmother, who are the two strongest women I know. You never doubted or questioned me. You told me I could do and be anything I wanted.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## ABSTRACT

### CONTEMPORARY GIRLS: UNDERSTANDING THE CONTRADICTORY FEMININE DEMANDS IN THE HIGH SCHOOL CLASSROOM

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George Mason University, 2011

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This research project will explore how gender, particularly notions of femininity, is structured in the classroom and what effects feminine notions have on girls' interpretations of school. I hope to develop an in-depth understanding of how one diverse high school, as a site where social scripts of femininity play out, shape girls' experiences in school and their understanding of academic success. In the case of my research, this will be a study in contrast- how two extremely different groups of girls occupy the same space and negotiate similar issues, but do it in very different ways. To get at the meaning(s) girls place on school I aim to focus on the "talk" of girls. If school is also seen as a social place, and not just for academics by students, what students talk about and who they talk to (peers and teachers) is vital to understanding the role school plays in their lives. I am not suggesting that the social overshadows academics, but the reality is that girls do recognize the social role of school- even if they cannot verbalize it in

succinct terms. I also aim to focus on the role of school as a site for identity formation and how gender dynamics aid in girls' abilities to discover who they are. More importantly I want to examine how girls address the competing demands that exist in school- doing well academically and doing well in gender. For all these reasons focusing on gender in the classroom is critical to understanding what and how girls think, feel and express themselves in both verbal and non-verbal ways.



## 1: AN INTRODUCTION

*In the Nations Report Card from 2009 the grade point average for male and female high school students has continued to rise since the 1990s. However, the average GPA for female students was 3.10, while for male students it was at 2.90 (The Nations Report Card: 2009).*

Statistics such as these bring visibility to the scholastic success of girls where it had not always been present. Research in the early 1990s began to shift focus onto girls' academic performance drawing attention to the changes that had been taking place in schools. It became evident girls were "outperforming boys in the classroom...girls have higher grade point averages and college attainment rates" (Carter 2005: 77). The fact that girls are/were competing academically with boys, even though they had been overshadowed in the classroom and in research for decades, was becoming a reality. The AAUW's (1992: 35) early reports noted "researchers continued to document girls out scored boys on tests of verbal ability starting at grade five or six." This AAUW report revealed that girls were equally competing in school, even at an early age, against boys. It is reports such as the AAUW that helped lessen the divide between what boys and girls were seen as being capable of accomplishing in school.

However, gendered assumptions in school did not completely disappear as a result of a research paradigm shift. Despite girls' success in school, there were still assumptions being made about girls' behavior and expectations that remained in light of their

academic accomplishments. The aim of my study is to better understand this gender paradox of how girls can be out performing boys academically, but still see schools as sites where narrow notions of femininity are at work. In particular, how is femininity structured in high school and how, in turn, does the construction of femininity influence academic achievement? By focusing on high school girls, I want to highlight both the narrow notions of femininity in school and the “breaking down” or negotiations of narrow notions of femininity in school.

## GENDER AND EDUCATION

Generally, sociologists argue gender is not biological, rather socially constructed. As Henslin (2006: 256) states, “...sex refers to male or female, gender refers to masculinity or femininity. In short, you inherit your sex, but you learn your gender...” Gender, from a sociological perspective, is not located in one’s physical sex; rather based on the acts of group terms, symbols, activities and behaviors. And it is these group acts to which people are attached that characterize the social construction of gender.

At a very young age people, in general, are socialized to identify themselves under terms that have stereotypical gendered meanings. Since most behaviors tend to be interpreted by society in gendered ways the perception of what are boy/girl distinctions are collapsed with what is masculine/feminine and the biological understanding of what is male/female. For many feminist researchers the conflation of gender and sex creates some difficulty in ascribing behaviors as boy/girl. For this reason it is important to understand how I define gender, sex and social/gender scripts for this study. Boy/girl will

refer to gendered behavior corresponding to one's biological sex (male/female); while masculine/feminine refer to the social scripts that are used to characterize gender (Henslin 2006). Social or gender scripts are actions or behaviors informed and guided by group norms based on the perception of what is acceptable by others (Lorber 1994). Together these scripts are ascribed through group membership and are used by individuals to navigate their daily lives. If gender informs how individuals live their lives, social and gender scripts are influenced by the perception of gender in the lives of individuals.

It is important to note that gender, as a social construction of agreed upon norms within a group, is not static. Feminist scholars believe that gender is part of a performance, an ever-changing act, which has both individual and communal meanings (Butler 1988). Carter (2005: 81) explains that the operation of "gender comprises a set of constructed acts and performances that are both individually and socially meaningful...scripts about maleness and femaleness are observed, watched, guarded, protected and reinforced." Gender is a routine part of everyday activities that are important to the individual and the collective community. Many researchers "see gender as an institution that establish patterns of expectations for individuals, orders the social processes of everyday life, [and] is built into the major social organization of society" (Lorber 1994: 1). Because gender is understood and formed on a collective level, the act of gender is owned by the group through which it is constructed not the individual with who gender is intimately attached. This is what makes gender a social phenomenon- it is largely an identity construction that is "put on" to look natural (Butler 1988) by the

individual, but ultimately owned by the collective. Simply put, gender is accepted group actions and meanings that are highly influenced by others.

Adolescents, more specifically girls, are instrumental for examining gender because they are receptive to those people and ideas with which they are socialized, illustrating the relationship between collective and individual meaning. And what better place to examine this relationship then through the public education system, where school plays a role in a girl's ability to form her own identity. The public high school setting is an ideal location for gender and education research. This is a setting and time when girls are stepping away from parents and are attempting to solidify a place amongst their peers. For many, high school is experienced as a purgatory between primary school, where students are given little freedom, and college where, for middle class girls, freedom is almost fully granted. It is a site, recognized for its social and academic opportunities where students spend a large amount of their time. High school is also a place where girls begin to learn and explore who they are. It is imperative to further understand how girls are creating an identity in school while at the same time having their identities created by the schooling process. In school gendered dynamics appear through activities, seating assignments, and in (un)organized trips out of the classroom and through the hallways (Thorne 1993). These activities and the roles they take on are what have an effect on children at an early age and create gender identities with which they quickly associate. Many times these associations are based on the assumptions made by the education system that gender and sex are one in the same. Earlier research (1970s) often associated girls as being dependent, passive and obeying all the rules; which assumed a docile girl.

Gendered notions such as these make it difficult for girls to interpret who they are outside the “sex” terms that become exclusive to their understanding of gender (Lorber 1994; Francis 2006). The hidden curriculum of school that imparts narrow gendered ideals becomes limiting to girls’ freedom and authority within the space. As Fine and Weis (2003:109) state “although it is well understood that schooling plays a crucial role in offering opportunities for individual social mobility, it does, at the same time, serve to perpetuate and indeed legitimize widespread structural inequalities.” With these narrow notions of gender the education system is creating an environment where there is little room for girls to navigate outside and around the gender assumptions placed on them.

In the last two decades researchers are seeing girls, not as passive observers, but participants in their own socialization process. The feminist movements, of the second wave, allowed for new possibilities of girlhood where girls were able to alter the gendered frameworks with which they functioned on a daily basis. New opportunities emerged, but with opportunities came obligations of what was expected of girls and an emergence of a new set of markers that represented girlhood. Materialized through these new markers were girls who were, “...flexible, individualized, resilient, self-driven, and self-made... (Harris 2004: 16).” The development of a new girlhood has, through active engagement by girls in their daily lives, allowed for gender to become even more salient. As Harris (2004: 6) states, “Today, [girls] are supposed to become unique, successful individuals, making their own choices and plans to accomplish autonomy.” This is the new girl who, through active participation in school, creates opportunities for herself.

New girlhood, however, is not without contradictions. “The space of schools are still designed to produce and regulate notions of appropriate young womanhood. What is different today is that the terms of this construct have changed...” (Harris 2004: 104). Normative feminine traits such as being passive, dependent on others, and quiet in the classroom no longer represent adolescent girls in the new girlhood. As Harris (2004: 22) states “being sexually attractive, smart, and savvy... is the new package of young female success.” Girls are expected to be successful in the classroom while also being successful in gender, creating new pressures for girls that contradict those expected of them historically.

## 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on schools until the late 1970s virtually ignored the subject of gender and its relevance to schooling, since the focus for almost all research was *male-centric*. Education research focused little on girls aside from the stereotypical roles they should have within the classroom, and spent more time analyzing boys and their behaviors, often with little attention to gender itself. Once gender was recognized as relevant, it seemed ubiquitous in school and research that followed to examine both boys and girls.

During the second wave of feminism, researchers demonstrated that gender was meaningful to the schooling trajectories of students in ways that resulted in the uneven/unequal distribution of institutional resources and types of instruction provided to students by teachers. As Francis (2000: 4) states, “girls were marginalized and belittled in the classroom, the victims of systematic discrimination from male classmates and teachers and the school system itself.” Study after study demonstrated that girls were shortchanged of their educational opportunities (AAUW 1992; Sadker & Sadker 1994). They were called on less in class, not encouraged to participate in math and sciences, but rewarded for feminine behaviors that discouraged girls from being outspoken. Girls were not expected to succeed in most academic classes where historically boys were thought more naturally inclined such as math and science. Gender ideologies promoted the belief that girls were not expected to become anyone/thing more than homemakers, mothers and

caregivers. What early gender and education research had discovered was the unequal treatment of girls in the classroom had become part of the fabric of schools.

While it is widely recognized today that girls are/were shortchanged in school, interestingly they often outpace boys on key performance measures such as grades, test scores and college attainment rates (AAUW 1992; Henslin 2006). This is a curious paradox. How is it that schools can maintain this treatment, when by all accounts girls are doing better than boys? As Francis & Skelton (2005: 79) note, “it is not that girls have grown more innately intelligent, rather social conditions that were previously inhibiting their achievement have been altered...”

Owing in large part to feminist researchers, changes in the perception of what girls could do brought light to the educational disadvantages they had dealt with historically. In more current research, girls are seen as being “more confident, assertive, self-assured and keener...flexible and self-made worker[s]” (Harris 2004: 43-44). However, despite efforts to reverse gender tracking, social and academic barriers are still present everyday in the classroom despite achievements made by girls thus far. As McRobbie (2004: 9) states, “the new female subject, despite her freedom, is called upon to be silent, to withhold critique in order to count as a modern sophisticated girl.” The sense is that girls are just as intelligent as boys, but must hide their abilities in order to not be seen as breaking “socially expected” gendered norms. These standards of femininity, fair or not, are played out in school and reinforced by peers, teachers and parents, and indeed girls themselves. It is this negotiation McRobbie discusses that is



present and of interest in current research. Despite gains made by girls, gender continues to be a major organizing principle in schools that shape how girls and boys experience their education.

*Becoming a Girl- Narrow Notions & Institutional Reactions to Girls in School*

“Girls are supposed to be *smart* and *appear* dumb. The point is not whether you are smart, rather whether you are in tune with the social cues and willing to hide your capabilities” (Brown 1998: 159). Research over the last decade has suggested that femininity in schools has been key in creating narrow notions of what is projected on girls and boys within the classroom. These projections ultimately have consequences on life course and attainment aspirations for students. Research has shown that the institution of school and institutional actors (teachers and administrators) are historically and conventionally viewed under a masculine lens equating boys with rebellion and defensiveness and placing girls into stereotypical feminine roles that align them with conformity, docility, and acceptance (Carter 2005). Like others, Orenstein (2000: xvii) noted that in the classroom “it’s clear that both girls and boys have learned to equate maleness with opportunity and femininity with constraint” with regard to official/informal schooling practices. Ultimately, what a girl is capable of doing and becoming is narrowly defined by the institutions with which they regularly interact. And as Proweller (1998: 7) states, “historically there was a general willingness by female students to fold in and internalize roles of women based on the traditional sexual division of labor” that commonly idealized what was expected of women. Thus creating, whereby

girls internalize gender ideals, conflict between what girls want to do, what they feel they are able to do, and what others believe they can do. Both Brown and Proweller identify the obvious conflict girls face in school. Francis (2000: 15) also explains that in her research she commonly came across the dichotomies of “masculinity [to reference] rationality, strength, aggression, competition, mind, science, activity and independence; feminine [to reference] emotion, frailty, care, co-operation, body, nature/arts, passivity and dependence.” Thus, schools are encouraging girls to hide behind narrow feminine notions in the classroom, further reinforcing the institutional misunderstandings of what girls are capable of doing. The consequence is that girls may feel as if their options are narrowed and voices silenced. Narrow notions of femininity not only affect a girl’s academic achievement, but their sense of self.

As a result, gender stereotypes that equate girls with compliance, weakness and reliance, influence a girl’s actions compromising her understanding of who she really is or can become. As a girl’s sense of self regarding her academic success is silenced, many times more attention is directed toward her body. This type of attention turns the focus to an examination of docility, whereby the girls’ bodies become hyper visible as sexual objects and less attention is paid to the encouragement of intellectual advancement. Attention is now aimed not at the person but one’s physical appearance. And in a setting where peers and adults have a strong influence “high school girls are often denied control over their bodies, their desires, and their self-definition” (Best 2004: 199). As Bettis and Adams (2005: 10-11) state, “One of the most powerful lessons that children learn in school is to control and regulate their bodies. The result of such regulatory practices in

our society is the production of ‘docile bodies.’” A girl’s body, in this instance, is no longer “a girl’s body;” rather a body managed by others. By being seen as docile and letting others regulate what a girl does, says, or how they look begins to represent gender as it is interpreted by others instead of allowing girls to manage it themselves. This regulation of gender by others becomes a means of stereotyping what is proper behavior and appearance for boys and girls; which justifies guidelines for what is expected and accepted within the classroom.

Ultimately, when girls are seen under the purview of narrow feminine notions, those notions are commonly reflected back onto the girl. What results is the creation of an environment that lumps girls together in terms of expected gendered behaviors making it difficult for girls to move in and around the assumptions held in place by others. This “illustrates the tendency towards over generalization that is involved with analyzing young people in terms of gender” (Francis 2000: 31). Masculine or feminine behaviors are socialized around children, especially in school, beginning at a young age through adolescents and adulthood under what some view as universal expectations.

### *Beyond White Girls: Race and Class in Schools*

Early research on gender in education supported a middle-class bias where the middle class became the measuring stick of education achievement. This bias measured and evaluated the everyday lives of students in relation to the white and middle-class since they represent the standard of expectation within the educational system. For decades, the focus of research on minority students was largely based on socioeconomic

status and urban living. Minority races were thought to be “poor” and unmotivated people. The relationship between race and education in turn had a direct influence on how research had been developed, leading to studies conveying that “many of the experiences of students of color and those with the lowest level of achievement were ‘harsh’ or ‘contentious’” (Arnot 2006: 415). Many non-white students “perceive schooling as a ‘white’ domain and high academic achievement as being incongruent with their racial and ethnic identities” (Carter 2005: 52). For this reason many non-white/minority students found navigating school difficult and more or less something successfully achieved by white students. Non-white students’ experiences in and about school did not follow the same trajectory as their white counterparts. Many times minority students’ experiences were influenced by their respective cultures and others perceptions of their cultures.

So it is of no surprise when researchers began to notice the lack of *positive* research that pertained to minorities, much less minority girls. As Francis and Skelton (2005: 108) states, “the achievement of minority girls tends to either be ignored or problematised.” It is the lack of being noticed and many times others’ misperceptions of minority girls that plays a part in the educational experience and the role school has in their lives. As Hall and Thirston (2011: 68) state:

Educators tend to be unaware of students’ cultural communities and unable to appropriately read their behavior, what can result is cultural dissonance in teacher-student relationships. In some instances, educators stigmatize students and resolve (consciously and unconsciously) not to teach them, and students, feeling inept or mislabeled (real or perceived), choose to no longer learn.

There is a disconnection in the cultural understandings between many schools and educators and their students that creates a negative experience for many minority students. For many Black and Hispanic girls the messages they receive about their ability to succeed and value as students in “school is not just a matter of cultural incongruence with teacher beliefs and biased curriculum, but also of ideas generated by the larger society” (Hall and Thirston 2011: 70). Schools send unhealthy messages to girls about who they are in the classroom and what they have to contribute toward their future. The messages and assumptions coming at students hits them before they even walk through the school’s front door, which means cultural misconceptions are around them all the time.

One of the most common misconceptions teachers and schools have about minority, especially Hispanic, girls is that they do not care about their education. In many cases “success in school reflects a sense of culture. Just because youth don’t succeed doesn’t mean they don’t care” (Valenzuela 2005: 93). It is not that success in school is not important for non-white girls; rather some girls’ values and goals may simply be influenced by different experiences and resources not held by the white middle-class. Whether positive or not, cultural membership has an effect on the ability of a girl to navigate in school through the cultural scripts placed on them by others. For many non-white girls the negotiation of culture and femininity is a continual struggle in regards to school. Success within education, for many Hispanic girls, means giving up a part of themselves, a part of their culture, where women are commonly caretakers to their families. Many times taking on the role of caregiver to family, friends and/or community

is inconsistent with the requirements and desire to get an education. The classroom becomes another site, apart from the home or neighborhood and community, where girls must negotiate school against the strong influence of cultural expectations. Something middle-class white girls rarely have to manage.

Non-white girls' aspirations in conjunction with the construction of feminine identity in school may operate in a more complex way than it does for middle-class girls. As Bettie (2003: 159) expresses "Mexican-American students [in this instance] must negotiate education mobility with the broader social perception that this mobility represents assimilation to whiteness." For many minority girls their attachment to their background and financial resources can put a strain on the potential of educational achievement, despite their desire for success. Though these girls may see education as an opportunity, their families may view school as a vehicle for assimilating into the "white world" (Bettie 2003). Girls in this situation, who do not take advantage of positive educational opportunities, may be seen as giving into an idealized poor or lower-class culture that has been so long stereotyped as the norm. This complexity of wants, desires, and reality creates conflict for many non-white girls and the environment for which they must navigate. As Twenge (2006: 186) states:

Children of immigrants walk a delicate line between their parents' communal culture and the individualist ethos of the United States...Many young Hispanics take pride in their ethnic identity and fully recognize that their generation has opportunities that their parents never dreamed of.

Even when non-white girls are in an environment where educational achievement is a given outcome, there are still challenges that exist for girls in making the opportunity a

reality. For Hispanic girls, an education is not just about showing up to class, it is about taking advantage of opportunity not always available to them and managing school with familial and cultural expectations. These factors are what make race and class such salient parts of the education research and the educational experience for minority students. Combined with gender, cultural attachment plays a much larger role for many minority girls' ability to navigate through school than it does for their white middle-class counterparts.

*The New Girl: New Contradictions of Girlhood*

In more recent years girls have increasingly been socialized to become what Anita Harris (2004) describes as a “can do” girl, an idealized construct against which all girls are measured. The “can do” girl normally comes from a financially stable family and community, is taking college-prep courses, and has a strong supportive peer group dynamic. She will attend college, be financially independent, and have a stable job/career. This “can do” girl is told that she can be and do anything. As Harris (2004: 13) states, “Teenage girls are supposed to be more confident and resilient than ever before; they have ‘the world at their feet’.” Can-do girls are seen as being successful outside the home and challenging the conventions of what it means to be a girl. However, they must do so while portraying the image of maintaining the narrow feminine ideals expected by society- being cooperative, dependent and/or emotionally driven (Harris: 2004; Proweller: 1998). For many girls this “can do” attitude comes with the expectations of giving up those things that are stereotypically associated with being a woman such as

taking care of the family, early marriage or childbirth (Harris 2004). Girls are encouraged to attend college, focus on a career and follow a path to economic independence all while looking pretty, keeping quiet and a smile on their faces.

With this new girlhood it is important to understand the markers which define girls and explore the aspects in their lives that play a role in the construction of self. Normative feminine traits such as being passive, obeying all the rules, and not standing out in the classroom no longer represent girlhood (Bettis & Adams: 2005). Despite this fact, as Harris (2004: 103) states, “Schools have always been sites for the production of normative femininity and ‘appropriate’ young women.” Today, girlhood is about the contradictions and competing demands on girls and how they handle the “pressure.” To be successful, today’s girls are structured to be self-driven and self-made, resilient and flexible, and autonomous and confident while consciously being “feminine.”

For many girls, dealing with the demands placed on them and the success they are expected to obtain may come at a price. Girls are not always given the strategies or outlets for dealing with their success no matter their level of achievement. Orenstein (2000: 36-7) explains “gifted girls who remain academically engaged must negotiate between the independence necessary to fulfill their potential and the compliance which, although expected of them, is in direct conflict with standing out and shining bright.” It is a struggle for girls of being silent or outspoken, active or passive in class- all of which express different assumptions and expectations about the roles girls should have in the classroom. This is what makes the new girlhood experience a negotiable process full of



contradictions- girls attempt to meet the new demands, but still have narrowed standards placed on them.

What schools represent for girls is an environment where intellectual development is encouraged, but gender expectations routinely hold them back. As Paechter (2006: 372) discusses “femininity constructed in school excludes confidence in one’s own ability; even the cleverest girls have to play this down to avoid losing their reputation for ‘niceness.’” If a girl sits idle in the classroom she may be seen as succumbing to the feminine ideals that have historically demanded passivity. Yet if she speaks up in class, even in response to teachers and peers, she runs the risk of being seen as disruptive or aggressive. As a result of the achievements and outright contradictions girls face, they must develop strategies, many times on their own, in order to negotiate the academic minefield and the demands expected of them to maintain their feminine qualities. For many girls it is a no win situation. “Moving into the dominant social construction of femininity demands that much of what girls know, feel, and think disappear, or at least that girls compromise what they know about themselves” (Brown 1998: 110) in order to fit into the socially accepted gendered norms. What becomes important for girls, especially a can-do girl, is developing their abilities to move through and deal with the mixed messages that swirl around them in school. Harris (2004: 8) describes the new girlhood as, “Young women [who] have been encouraged to believe that ‘girls can do anything’ and ‘girls are powerful’” while also negotiating the demands placed on them that may contradict a can-do mentality. Just as society viewed boys a few decades ago, there has been a shift in the thought of what makes a successful girl. Through negotiating

the classroom, parents, teachers and peers, a new girl has begun and continues to emerge in today's society.

### 3: METHODS

Research for this project was conducted through qualitative research at Valley High School<sup>1</sup> (VHS) an ethnically diverse high school with one of the highest income percentages in its Northern Virginia County during the fall of 2008 and early spring of 2009. The area is more rural in comparison to other high school locations, but continues to develop shopping centers and large middle to upper-class neighborhoods. The high school had approximately 2,700 students, well over its intended capacity, with an 89.9 percent graduation rate and 89.5 percent of those students who graduate attend a two or four year college. VHS holds the center for Technology and Information as its academic specialty and magnet program. Approximately 45.7 percent of the students at VHS take part in the Technology programs. I chose VHS not because of the technology programs, but because the administrative staff was willing to open the doors to their classrooms and allow me to attend select classes and interview those students who willingly volunteered.

#### *Procedures and Participants*

My research consisted of seven months of observations and interviews between the months of October and April. I visited the school once or twice weekly staying for two classes and/or a minimum of four hours for each visit. I observed students in the classroom, hallways, the library, and the cafeteria when permitted. I was allowed to

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<sup>1</sup> Valley High School is being used as a pseudonym.

consistently visit four classes throughout my time at VHS, each having a diverse group of students who were not limited to any specific academic track. I was granted access to a Family & Life class, pre-AP biology (grades 9 & 10), 10th grade Physical Education & Health, and a 9<sup>th</sup> grade English class. The students were between the ages of 14 and 17 and predominantly 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> graders with several 11<sup>th</sup> graders inter-dispersed in two classes (Family & Life and Physical Education & Health). I visited each class at minimum twelve times staying for the duration of each class throughout the seven months.

I focused my time on what was said and done by students and teachers during each class. I took extensive jottings while I was in class noting important factors such as actions, interactions and reactions of students in conjunction with classroom activities paying attention not only to what was said, but what physically occurred among the students. How students reacted to each other; what students talked about (school related or not); how students interacted with each other and their teachers; what students wore, listened to, watched on TV, carried with them and ate; how students moved through the classroom and hallways were some of the vital factors I focused on while in the classroom. These actions and interactions tell a much larger story about what goes on in the classroom and what role school has for students providing me with an opportunity to see how these girls' lives play out in the classroom.

The first two visits of each class consisted of classroom observations only, gaining an understanding of how the class flowed and how I would be perceived by the students and teachers. Ultimately, the students and teachers made me feel like I was a

part of the class encouraging my participation when appropriate within class discussions. This afforded me the opportunity to gain a sense of the school setting, the teachers, and to get to know the girls on a more personal level.

### *Interviews and Fieldnotes*

In addition to observations I conducted six interviews; speaking with a total of 11 girls. In total I held two focus groups with three girls in each, three individual interviews and an interview with two girls. With permission from the teachers and parents I conducted these interviews in the school's library conference room during class and lunch. The group interviews lasted well over an hour, while my individual interviews were approximately 30 minutes. The students participated on a voluntary basis with approval from parents.

The purpose of these interviews was to gain an in-depth understanding of what goes on during the school day as it is narrated by the girls. These interviews gave me the chance to ask clarifying questions that I had from my observations and get the girls' viewpoints of what occurs throughout their day. The purpose for the interviews was to provide depth to my observations.

### *Data Analysis*

On a routine basis, after each field observation, I transformed my jottings into fieldnotes; which serve as the basis of my analysis. After each set of interviews I transferred and transcribed the audio data. Included within the transcriptions are my

jottings and notes taken during the interviews which consist of thoughts that occurred to me during the interviews; body gestures, movements and cues by the girls; and other observations I felt would be useful and necessary for data analysis. Another key aspect for my analysis is the use of memo writing as a means of working through ethical and analytical thoughts and feelings that I thought were important to focus on at the time of fieldnote writing.

I coded fieldnotes and interviews identifying common themes and patterns that developed throughout my research. My method of coding consists of open coding, a line-by-line analysis, allowing for an in-depth examination of my notes and interviews. After initial coding I conducted a more focused (re)coding capturing core themes. I took major themes/patterns identified through coding/recoding and develop them into additional memos where I analytically worked through thoughts, interpretations and connections between themes. Together these methods and procedures allow me to continually work through and around the data.

### *Limitations*

One of the greatest limitations I faced was the difficulty in getting girls to commit to doing interviews. I had over 25 girls verbally agree to be interviewed and most of them took the consent and assent forms home to be signed, but very few brought them back. What quickly became apparent was the girls I talked with the most in the classroom were the ones who committed and participated in the interviews. However, in the long run

trying to get a larger sample size for interviews was the most difficult part of my research.

There was also the obstacle of time for meeting with the girls outside of the classroom since many were dependent on the bus, too young to drive and/or were involved in after-school activities. Though I was very lucky to have the freedom to meet with the girls during their classes and lunches the constraints of time limited my in-depth inquiry. Though the girls were very open with me in the classroom, I tried to limit our discussions to before or after class so not to disrupt the normal flow of the teacher and other students.

I also think my age, 25 years old at the time, created some barriers in both connecting with the students, but also separating myself from them. I felt a constant push-and-pull in how I was to act and what I could and could not say based on my position in the classroom. Though I may not be far removed from my years in high school, and enjoyed my time with them in the classroom, I had to be conscious of monitoring that fine line between being a friend and being a researcher. Many times I found myself wanting to get involved in their discussions, but contradictorily wanting to quiet the girls when they spoke out of turn so they would not get in trouble. I felt most out of place when students would whisper, blush or even comment when talking about a topic they thought might be embarrassing to them. I felt like the intrusive adult in those moments, yet overall as I became a regular in the classroom and as they became more comfortable with me those feeling of intrusion subsided.

Finding a suitable role in the classroom vis-à-vis teachers, who were much closer to my age, was also quite difficult. Sometimes they even asked for my participation in activities such as biology labs, lectures on Romeo and Juliet and even playing a game of volleyball or soccer. For many of the teachers I became someone they looked forward to having in class. On one particular day as I was walking out of Mrs. Adams biology class she says to me, “I wish you were here last class or the past week for that matter.” Mrs. Adams had a female student who “totally flipped out” in class. She tells me, “not that it is your job, but it would have been nice to have another adult.” The challenges of how to place myself in the classroom were overshadowed by the fact the teachers accepted me and allowed me the freedom to move and be in the class like one of the students. I believe it was my own inhibitions that created the most challenge in how to be and act around the students. In the long run, the environment lent itself to my research and to allowing me the flexibility to be in the mix or on the sideline of my research.

### *Assumptions and Notions*

Growing up in a largely middle-class community in Southern Virginia I attended the local “in-demand” public high school with most of my friends I had known since elementary and middle school. A sense of privilege, power and entitlement was something many of us felt and carried as we walked the halls of our school. We were taking, and many times told to take, the exclusively upper and college level core classes. Most of these classes were only afforded to about 10 percent of the school population, which instilled in us a sense of power and privilege. Most of us played high profile sports, took part in student council, and were active in other clubs and extracurricular



activities. We walked through the halls as if we owned them and we felt/thought we got away with just about anything. Put a handful of us together in a “regular,” but required class, we were a teacher’s nightmare. It was not because we did not do well; on the contrary we did our work and got high grades, but we did it on our terms. This sometimes bordered on being disrespectful to our teachers and other students. I look back at this and think, “Were we really that bad?” “Did they really let us get away with this?” and “Did we really get away with ‘influencing’ how teachers ran a class?” Whether we had as much power as we thought, it is the case that we rarely got in any trouble for our “bad” behavior. In countless small ways, we held a sense of entitlement that controlled the school and it was not uncommon for class activities, assignments or deadlines to change upon our insistence- with or without a reasonable excuse. In my high school, the high-achieving students held the power, or at least we thought we did.

My own experiences in high school shaped how I conducted this research and how I related to the students. I was comfortable in talking with the girls who approached me, yet at times uneasy and feeling judged. Despite the entitlement I felt in school, I also remember feeling a sense of uneasiness as I sat in my high school classrooms less than 10 years ago. As I sat at VHS I would ask myself “could these girls have any of the same feelings I did when I was their age?” That feeling of uneasiness outside of my entitlement, I believe had nothing to do with race and/or class since most of my classes I took had predominately white middle-class students in them. I think it was because I was a girl who felt judged and compared to all the other girls in my classes on looks and academic status/success. I was not only self-conscious of my appearance in comparison

to others, but I had to deal with the pressures of competing and maintaining academic success with all the other boys and girls in my classes. As I discussed earlier- it was the uneasiness of dealing with the competing demands placed on me (as a girl) in comparison to those I was directly associated.

And with this recognition, I feel I was like many of the girls I came across in my research, especially those like The Belles (who I will discuss later), who are white middle/upper class girls. Many times I found myself lost in what The Belles were doing, saying and how they were acting as if I were one of them, as if I was back in my high school English class. The feelings I was having may have helped forge my relationships with all the girls because the reality is I identified strongly with most of the girls I met throughout my research for various reasons.

However, it is also important to make note that with all the ease I felt toward The Belles, I had little of the same ease with The Quinces, who are Hispanic outsiders in the school. This does not mean I could not relate with them at all, it simply means the flow of conversation both in the classroom and in our interviews required more work. The tangible elements of being around The Belles were not afforded to me when I was with The Quinces as there was less of a personal connection. Whether I was like them or not, both my sense of entitlement from when I was in school and the insecurities I felt amongst my immediate peers, I believe, allowed me the opportunity to be open with these girls and allow these girls to be open with me without passing judgment.

With all that said, I also felt compelled on occasion to step back, take a minute and remember to not impose my own experience on the data; rather allow the data to present itself to me and not as I related to it when I was younger. I do believe that my experiences and recognition of my feelings allowed me to be more introspective and compassionate as I traveled through the school setting and forced me to look beyond that which I was most comfortable.

#### 4: THE GIRLS: THEIR VOICE, THEIR BODIES AND THE IDEALIZED

Girls and their lives are quite complex. Their lives represent the competing demands of not being the girl from decades ago who sits and lets life happen to her, but also not being the sole individual breaking down barriers with which they face. In fact, girls today represent a myriad of attributes. Girls move through school negotiating the academic and social pressures facing them each day, while dealing with the challenges of being a teenager. They struggle with the notions of femininity that commonly hold them back academically. For some girls their goal is to balance competing demands- be pretty and smart, nice and driven. Michelle Fine (1993: 90) states that, "If we re-situate the adolescent woman in a rich and empowering educational context, she develops a sense of self which is sexual as well as intellectual, social and economic." As Fine argues it is vital for girls to be in an environment where they are not constrained from understanding who they are sexually, socially, emotionally and intellectually. School is no longer about giving girls a foot up; it is about providing an environment where adolescents can flourish socially as well as academically and construct gender identities that are ideal and appropriate for them.

It is important to emphasize that all girls, and boys for that matter, do not construct the same gender identities. Masculine/feminine behavior is based on normative

gender ideals beginning at childhood and reinforced by peers, parents, and various social environments over time. As Lorber (1994:7) states, “the patterned and intertwined structures of work, family, culture, education, religion, and law are gendered, and they deeply and continuously shape the lives of individuals, starting at birth...” Gender ideals, what a group sees as being appropriate behavior, are reinforced throughout the developmental stages of childhood, continuing into adolescence and adulthood. With the various influences and social environments that kids become engaged with, in and out of school, no one individual has the same experiences. Experiences are what help shape a girl into being her own individual and constructing her own identity; while confronting the competing demands between the ideal feminine notions of what is expected of a girl with those of their desire to not be like everyone else.

### *VOICE*

Throughout my research much of my focus centers on girls and their talk. What girls say, how they say it, and whom they talk to are important in understanding what goes on during the school day. The voice they present to their friends, teachers or peers tells a lot about who they are. In this instance, voice is not solely about the use of one’s physical ability to speak, it is about the depth of what is being said and how one says it. What do girls really mean and what do they claim with their voice? Whether their voice is used as a way to claim physical space or used as a means of asserting themselves with a space, being loud and outspoken- voice for girls can be a way to control the

environment<sup>2</sup> in which they occupy. For many girls voice is a way to claim control of self (body) and space. Brumberg (1998: 97) states, “The body is a consuming project for contemporary girls because it provides an important means of self-definition, a way to visibly announce who you are to the world.” The body is seen as a project- a work in progress- that girls focus their attention and place great importance on. It is the first visible means by which a girl is able to present herself to the world and she uses her voice as the mechanism with which to assert control over the image that is portrayed. Girls are able to discuss (and show off) their bodies or that of others in a way that is meaningful to them and sometimes only understood by them.

Voice is also a way to claim space- physically and symbolically. However, this does not mean girls must be loud and outspoken to claim space. Yes, loud girls may claim more symbolic space because their actions/voice attracts more attention; but quiet girls claim space in a much more subtle manner. Their voices are not heard by everyone, rather by those immediate peers with whom they trust and associate. They do not necessarily desire to claim space in the same way loud girls do, which often results in being missed in research. And even though in my research I was attracted to the louder group of girls, I would be remiss to ignore the voice of the “quiet” girls who are likely more commonplace in the classroom. For example, there was a young girl who sat directly in front of me in the Biology class named Tonya. She is a German-born white girl who has lived in the United States, due to her father’s job promotion, about half her

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<sup>2</sup> And for the purpose of my research “the environment” is the space of school and more specifically the classroom.

life and who recently passed her English as a Second Language class. She explains to me about her experiences in class:

Tonya: I prefer to lay low. If nobody says anything I will raise my hand but I don't want to be the first to raise my hand.

TC: Can I ask why?

Tonya: I'm just a little shy when it comes to that.

TC: Does that have anything to do with whether you might be right or wrong or is it just the shyness?

Tonya: It's the shyness and just a little bit of the wrong and right. I don't want to be the one person who doesn't know the answer. It makes me feel kind of stupid.

TC: So there's a little pressure there.

Tonya: Yes there is.

For Tonya, who is a straight-A student, being seen and not heard is satisfactory. Some of this may be the difference between schools in Germany, where she was a straight-C student, and schools in the United States or it simply may be the pressure she feels to be successful in school. As Tonya later tells me "I have three friends in [Biology] class and they're real nice. They're quiet. We have our own little corner."

The friends Tonya refers to are three other girls who sit at the same table. They sit toward the back of the class, and if I had not been sitting directly behind them I would have likely never noticed them. They rarely talk out of turn and commonly Mrs. Adams has to call on them to answer questions as they are unlikely to blurt out answers or even raise their hands. For Tonya it may be more about maintaining a sense of control over her actions, her voice, and not calling attention to herself. Although the Biology class may be

more restricting in allowing students to talk “out of turn,” I also observed Tonya in a Physical Education and Health class where she was again lost in the shuffle of the more outspoken students.

In relation to girls like Tonya, Brown (2005:149 & 153) states class matters. White working class girls bring “their loud, direct selves to school” while the white middle and upper-middle class girls, at least among those she studied, “struggle with the contradictory voices telling them what it means to be good and proper...” Tonya, along with many of her friends, seems to epitomize Brown’s assertion that class matters. She is a hard worker who gets good grades, but falls under the radar because she does not attract much attention to herself. And where Brown’s claims pertain to Tonya, it will be apparent throughout my research that class does not matter in the same way.

Many of the girls in my classes seemed to stray away from the compliance and silence that Tonya and her immediate peers exhibited, despite their economic class. For these girls, voice is a significant concept in the classroom. A girl’s voice is the difference between being seen and being lost in the shuffle of everyday academic and social situations. As Brown (1998:3) states “Much attention of late has been given to girls’ invisibility in schools, to sexual harassment in public spaces such as cafeterias, hallways...,to gender bias in the classroom, [and] to losses in self-esteem and self-confidence.” What is visible in my research is that most of the girls from various cultural and economic backgrounds I focused on use their voice to actively express themselves to



their peers and teachers<sup>3</sup>. They stake a claim of the space and gain visibility through their voice, breaking away from the concepts formed by Brown. Invisibility is not a barrier the girls I mainly focus on must breakthrough.

I found at VHS that voice seemed to be more about one's ability, despite class or race, to engage with others and be self-assured in the space with which they inhabit. There seemed to be less consistent restrictions placed on the girls I was drawn by their teachers, peers and even themselves on how they control their voice in the classroom. This does not mean there are no boundaries; it simply means that voice is used as a way to claim school as a space to be defined and controlled by them versus by others.

### *THE GIRLS AND THEIR BODIES*

About one month into my observations I was finally allowed to walk around the halls with a little more freedom before classes. With about 10 minutes before the bell rang for classes to switch I found myself sitting at a table in the open air cafeteria next to the gym and health classrooms. As I was sitting at the table, noticing the only other person in the space was a cafeteria worker, I caught a glance of a poster that was between two doors by the kitchen where students line up to get food. The poster had large print that read "Beauty Sold Here." My first reaction was to roll my eyes. Why would they be talking about beauty in a cafeteria - as if girls do not have enough to worry about? When I looked closer I saw that inside of the cosmetics were fruits and vegetables relaying

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<sup>3</sup> It is important to note that I came across girls in each of the classes I observed who fit within the "outspoken" category. Whether they were in the Family & Life which encourages group work and in-class discussion or in the less social-centric Pre-AP Biology I found a combination of girls who made themselves visible and those who were more like Tonya.

specific colors of makeup. Blush was a tomato slice, cream was a cucumber slice, foundation was an orange slice, and mascara was asparagus. I am still not entirely sure what I think of the poster. If the first thing I noticed are the words “Beauty Sold Here” and think “I better not eat that pizza” I wonder if this was any different for any other girls in the school. Do students take the time to notice what the real message is suppose to be - taking care of yourself, eating healthily, and eating in moderation? Or do they see the message as being that their body takes center stage and that when you eat “bad” foods such as burgers, pizzas or fries (which are commonly available in a cafeteria) you are less beautiful. The message is about the body and not brains and achievement, which ultimately contradicts the purpose of going to school. This poster is just another piece of media advertisement, with conflicting images in the school, that throw “body image” ideals back into the faces of young girls who are in line for lunch in the cafeteria.

Every day in school girls are confronted with discussions and images centered on the body; their body or someone else’s. Schools are sites where girls discuss classes, teachers, clothes, and where they shop, what they are or are not having for lunch, how their hair looks, how they feel and how they look based on how they feel. Schools are a microcosm for all sorts of discussions and it is very likely the body is a common one. It is a site where ones voice is heard by others, projected onto others and sometimes even suppressed by others. As Aapola, et al (2005: 134) states “Media images of women tend to reify dominant cultural standards of beauty, rather than support the diversification of images of femininity.” This reinscription of cultural standards places girls and their bodies within the framework of the ideal feminine perception, whatever that may be to

them. I believe for each person that perception of what is the ideal body may be different, but “at the same time, girls and young women also face growing pressures to modify their appearance in order to fulfill ever-changing feminine beauty ideals, which are practically impossible to attain” (Aapola, et al 2005: 134). What I found most striking is that for most of the girls I observed and interviewed they identified “girl” with things like make-up, tight clothes, being skinny, and having nice hair. All things that can be changed in order to modify one’s impression they place on others. Many of these identifiers have in the past been used to idealize femininity and what it means to be a girl and is apparent to still define what it means to be a girl.

### *THE QUINCES*

The Quinces are a group of high school freshman who are straddling their Latin American and American youth culture as they come of age. They commonly discuss their ethnic heritages in regular conversation and with great pride. Even though historically their cultures of origin had been (and some may say still be) in conflict, these girls appear unified as a group by their cultural differences in comparison to others in their classes. Because of their Hispanic background, I choose to refer to this group of girls as The Quinces. Quinces is a term I am using that is derived from the shortened Quinceañera, which is a celebration of a Latin American girl’s 15<sup>th</sup> birthday. Similar to a Bar/Bat Mitzvah, this is a time when girls are in transition from childhood to womanhood. In the case with my research The Quinces are a group of girls, like many freshmen, who are beginning to explore their identity as they move from being teenagers to young women.

The Quinces is a small group of girls - Cammi, Rari and Sara. Cammi is a Mexican girl of average height and build - not too skinny or too heavy - with long straight black hair. She commonly wears skinny jeans, sneakers and a nice t-shirt; nothing too fancy. Rari is a petite El Salvadorian with shoulder length black hair she normally has tied back in a low loose ponytail. She wears boot-cut jeans (because her parents will not allow her to own skinny jeans) and cute tops, with ballet flats. Rari is the quietest of the girls, but when appropriate she willingly interjects her opinions. Sara is Guatemalan and the tallest of the girls. She is always wearing skinny jeans that appear to be just a little too tight; big flashy earrings; and trendy items from UGGs to sneakers to ballet flats, t-shirts to sweatshirts and tops that many adults might consider a little tight and risqué for school. Like The Belles, who I will introduce later, Sara and Cammi are two of the loudest girls in the class, which routinely draws the attention of Mrs. Smith, their Family and Life teacher.

What is evident about The Quinces is that they have a strong sense of their ethnicities and are proud to share it. Throughout my research there was much discussion about which country is better, who has the better dialect of Spanish, and who has the better cultural practices:

As the class is getting ready for the next assignment Cammi and Sara are making fun of the nickname they have for El Salvadorians. Rari says to them, "You are so mean." Sara says, "We don't have gangs like you do...MS-13." Lakisha leans over to Rari and says, "You don't have to worry about border crossings and drug cartels." Cammi says, "Hey that isn't fair." Rari says, "Guatemala is next to El Salvador so you are no different really... you copy us anyway." As the bell rings for lunch they begin talking about the difference between Mexican pupusa's and El

Salvadorian pupusa's. Sara says, "Yeah El Salvadorian food is better than Mexican." Rari says, "See El Salvadorian is better."

Together, they appear to hold light-hearted discussions about their various cultures; which would be a topic not always talked about openly in mixed crowds and commonly avoided within the classroom of a diverse school where someone could be offended.

In order to make sense of The Quinces it is important to understand that at VHS they are considered "outsiders" or the "minority." These girls, along with many others, are "bused" in. They wake up early to get the first bus, many times an hour before other kids, in order to get to school on time. They travel from other neighborhoods where many of their friends go to the other local zoned school, Capital High School (CHS). At CHS, The Quinces would be less of a minority and surrounded by more of their Hispanic peers. They also feel students and teachers would understand them better. As the girls discuss in our interview:

- |        |  |
|--------|--|
| Cammi: | This school is so different, it's like they, I don't know, half of them think we have no money to buy stuff. Like supposing now you have to use your computer to print out stuff and everything, and it costs to get paper and ink, it's not cheap, it doesn't cost \$1.00. In other schools, they really don't care, they print out the words and everything. |
| Sara:  | Yeah, some people think because it [Capital High School] has so many of one culture... they think it's a bad school or something. There are like a lot of Spanish speaking there...  |
| TC:    | It is? I'm not familiar...   |
| Rari:  | Then again, because it is, my parents look at it, like they don't want me there, there are some bad people there. They want me to get a good education.  |

- Cammi: I have a friend that got jumped and she got stabbed there, near there; and after my mom heard, her mom seen that, my mom didn't want me to go there.
- TC: Did she say why?
- Cammi: Just safety. She wants me to get a better education, because my sister, she went here for two years first, and went to Capital for one year, and here another year. Well, my sister just ended up skipping Capital, she didn't like that school.

For these girls they see themselves as not being of the VHS culture. They associate with friends who live closer to their neighborhoods and also attend CHS. By being bused in and coming from Hispanic backgrounds there is a sense that others do not understand who they are and from where they come. As Cammi states, “this school is different” from where they could go. As the girls expressed many times, there are advantages to going to a “better” school but there are also disadvantages. The Quinces feel they are not always understood and that assumptions are made about them both culturally and academically that are not placed so readily on other groups within the school.

### *The Quinces & Their Bodies*

The assumptions made about The Quinces are then reinforced based on how they look (their bodies), which is a visual representation of who they are - Hispanic girls. Simply based on their appearance- darker skin, black hair, and curvaceous body- places The Quinces as outsiders within VHS. However, outsiders or not, these girls are confident with themselves and how they display themselves to others. Their bodies are not solely a representation of who they are based on their physical appearance; they are symbols of transition from girlhood to womanhood. As Hyams (2006: 96) states from her

research conclusions, “they [young Latina women] spoke about the tremendous pressure they experienced in becoming high school students and the dilemma they faced in managing their own needs and desires and satisfying others’ expectations.” She continues (2006: 98) by saying that “when a young girl ‘becomes a woman,’ [this] necessitates an increase in internal and external control over her social interactions, spatial mobility, appearance, and bodily comportment.” The Quinces, much like the girls in Hyams’ study, are girls who are moving from childhood to womanhood and doing so in the hypersensitive environment of high school, where the perceptions of who they are will be inherently judged everyday by others. However, because of The Quinces’ confidence, their bodies are more a representation of them becoming women and having control over their appearance than about the necessity to manage the expectations of others.

Ironically, even though these girls are in a transitional period and see themselves as becoming women, they are still young. They define themselves based on things girls stereotypically associated as being for older girls and/or their mothers. While sitting down for a small group interview I asked Cammi, Rari and Sara, “What does it mean to be a girl?” They explain:

Cammi: I never thought about that.

Rari: To me, being a girl is like, I don't know, wearing makeup and stuff.

Cammi: Wearing tight clothes sometimes. I don't know, for me, I used to always like wearing loose clothes, but now I feel so uncomfortable if I ever wear loose clothes.

TC: Why?

Cammi: I don't know, things change.

The Quinceañeras delight in talk focused on traditional feminine concerns. They are quick to talk about make-up and clothing as this draws a strong association regarding “being a girl” for them. However, I also think the term “girl” for them may not have been about being young children and teenagers as much as it represented being female.

Make-up is/was a crucial aspect of what the Quinceañeras felt defined girls. The act and ability to wear make-up was about the image they portray at school, out in public and to others. As we discuss:

- TC: Why did you start wearing makeup?
- Cammi: I never thought - oh yeah, you can look pretty with makeup, but I don't know, sometimes you look just so pale or you look so different. Sometimes, of course, I don't wear it and sometimes I do. I don't know.
- Sara: I mean, I wear it because I think it makes me look better. When I do myself up with makeup, you feel more comfortable
- Rari: Especially when you wear it every day, and you're not wearing it one day, you're like - oh, look at me, you look so ugly...look so different.
- TC: Why do you think wearing makeup makes you feel more comfortable?
- Sara: Because you think you look better. To you, you look better.
- Cammi: And people do say - oh my gosh, you look so pretty, and everything. And one day, you just don't wear it; they just don't look at you. I never go without wearing makeup at all. I used to be - people will say, I don't know, I always used to say everything, like I'm not going to cut my hair, I'm not going to wear makeup, I'm not going to get my nose pierced or anything like that. Now look, I was doing those things --



Sara:                      Like when you get older, you think more about how you look than when you were younger.

For these girls, like many others, I would watch them pull out their make-up bags at the beginning of class or during a lecture. They discreetly open up their foundation that has a mirror and apply eye shadow or pluck their eyebrows- sometimes putting on some lip gloss. As Cammi explains:

Like some girls just get - for me, this year, I'm starting to wear it, because in years past, I never wore, I only wore eyeliner or nothing; but in this year, after I took - supposedly you become a woman, so I was waiting for a long time to start wearing it. I think other girls, I don't know how they put on so much - after they do, will actually have blood-like lipstick...

The focus of what being a girl means to them is very much centered on their awareness of their own bodies and how they look to others. But it is also being aware of what they think of others and what others may think of them. Make-up is not just about being a girl and being able to put on make-up. Nor is it about how make-up represents their transition to womanhood. And being in school where *image is everything*, The Quince's ability to manage their appearance through make-up is vital to their sense of identity. Make-up is about being able to control the image that is portrayed to others.

For Cammi, Sara and Rari their focus on "what it means to be a girl" is also about more than just wearing make-up; it is also about managing their appearance through clothing. As the girls stated earlier, clothing is another vital aspect of what being a girl means to them. The discussion about clothing- both what they wear and what others wear- was prominent in almost all the classes I observed. After a month of observations in The Family and Life class, The Quince's came over to me and asked if I wanted to sit

near them during the next class. As I am walking through the door the next day, the bell rings. Cammi waves at me pointing to where she wants me to sit. I quickly moved to an empty seat behind Rari. As I got settled I noticed the girls were starting to work on an assignment about puberty and self-esteem. By the time I am paying attention and gather if the discussion is on topic, Lakisha, an athletic African American girl who sits in front of The Quinces, starts talking about jeans. As the discussion continues:

Rari is wearing a slightly flared or boot-cut jean. As they discuss the fashion of both styles of jeans Sara says, "I don't like those" referring to the flared jean. Rari says that she does not have any skinny jeans and her parents will not buy her any. When I look around I notice there are several students who are wearing flared or boot-cut jeans and they are the "white students" (Roxy, Kara, Diana and myself). Most of the other students are wearing skinny jeans, from what I can tell. Sara says that she has big thighs and a big booty that she got from her dad. She smirks and says "I like my booty." She continues by talking about how this also means jeans normally gap in the back. Rari says "that if jeans fit perfectly in the thigh they are too big in the waist." They "never fit all over."

For the Quinces clothing is not only about style, it is also about how they feel about themselves in their clothing. For Cammi and Sara, the discussion about jeans is more about showing off their body, not wearing loose clothing and being comfortable. Rari on the other hand, who is restricted by her parents in her clothing choice (no skinny jeans) has less to add to the discussion. She is not allowed to wear skinny jeans, which is the current "girl style" worn by many students I came across over the year, and must wear the "less fashionable" boot-cut or flared style. For Rari there is a sense of missing out and not belonging to the "girl style" that her friends are a part of. However, despite her restrictions on wearing skinny jeans, Rari shares similar feelings about how her clothing fits. This shows that even if she is unable to wear the more fashionable styles she still has

strong feelings on how she looks in the clothing she is allowed to wear; which is the ultimate concern for any of the girls.

However, whether or not having the perfect outfit is important to who The Quinceañeras are as girls; what is significant is the consciousness they have regarding their bodies in spite of make-up and clothing. As McSharry (2009: 9) states, “Most adolescents are intensely aware of their changing bodies during their teenage years.” And The Quinceañeras’ awareness of what they do and do not have physically is no different from other girls. As their conversation unfolds:

I hear Lakisha, Rari, Sara and Cammi talking during a class assignment about the uterus, pimples, and breasts. Cammi quickly response that she likes hers, referring to her breasts, as she points and smiles. Cammi continues to tell the girls that her mom has the big breasts in her family. Sara follows up, “mine too.” Lakisha says she loves hers, as she cups them, but her sister’s are bigger. Rari, who is the most petite of the girls says she wishes her “boobs” would grow some more, but nods “for now I like them.” Cammi continues to describe that she has a weird space between her boobs and that her boobs don’t touch like all the celebrities. Lakisha tells her is it okay and that is normal.

Though these girls discuss their bodies quite freely, some still voice dislike with the size or placement of their “boobs<sup>4</sup>.” However, they ultimately do not hate what they have and understand that their bodies are what they are; which can be a reflection of their culture, their confidence, and the culture’s popular media representation. In their own way, The Quinceañeras talk about their boobs shows confidence in their bodies and ability to openly talk

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<sup>4</sup> I will reference the female anatomy using the same terms as The Quinceañeras. In this case “boobs” references woman’s breasts.

about it with one another<sup>5</sup>. However, there discussion about their boobs does turn into a comparison to those within popular culture. As Vargas and Lang (2009: 171) state, “The power of images of hypersexual Latinas, specifically Selena and Jennifer Lopez, is easy to see on [their]...desire for being sexy and having a ‘J Lo butt’...” I think this has to do with the cultural attachment where women like The Quinces are seen, at least in the social media, flaunting their curves.

Artists such as Jennifer Lopez were made famous not only because of their singing, but because of their infamous booties<sup>6</sup>. Or Salma Hayek who is an actress, producer, and director made famous not just because of her recognizable accent and acting talent, but because of her vivacious looks. Even though The Quinces are outsiders, like Jennifer Lopez and Salma Hayek were at the start of their careers, these girls take claim in who they are and what they look like. Like many powerful Latina/Hispanic women, The Quinces are confident in their bodies- curves or no curves, boobs or no boobs; it is simply about what they have and accepting it.

For the Quinces, clothing and make-up have powerful meanings for their confidence about how they feel in their bodies. Whether it is feeling more womanly or being able to express themselves, clothing and make-up and their ability to use and choose what image they portray to others, play a role in what being a girl means to them.

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<sup>5</sup> It is important to note that in the case of The Quinces their discussions on the body, puberty and sexuality were more likely fostered by being in a Family and Life class. This is a space where the majority of their discussions were about subjects such as emotions, changes that happen to their bodies, rape or sexual harassment and pregnancy. Though through my observations these are not discussions I witnessed in other classes.

<sup>6</sup> A term used by The Quinces in reference to one's curvy butt/derriere.

Each girl has some affinity to her body or at least appeared to appreciate it for what it is at the present moment. And together they were also supportive of each other, even if what they have is not ideal to what they want.

Due to their position in the transitioning years of becoming a young adult when I ask them “what does it mean to be a girl” their understanding of the topic is more about becoming a woman and feeling more womanly than it is about being “a girl.” As Brumberg (1998: 97) states, “The body is a consuming project for contemporary girls because it provides an important means of self-definition, a way to visibly announce who you are to the world.” As teenage girls, The Quinces see these high school years as a stepping stone of becoming a woman. Their growing sense of style and the simple things like wearing makeup become more pronounced. They use their developing bodies as a means of expressing themselves. And being able to engage this talk about their bodies is central to being a successful girl. The ability to talk about such a personal topic such as the body allows The Quinces to have a sense of ownership of who they are. They are able to have claim over their bodies and are aware of what it means to them. Though they define themselves as being girls through what many see as a stereotypical feminine lens; they are not bound by nor hide behind their body image, clothing or make-up.

The Quinces appear to choose not to look like all the other “insider” girls at VHS; even though once they get to school they certainly could go through the effort to look more like other girls. Their bodies, which could become a transgression of outsider status through diets or bleaching hair to look more like insiders, instead become a source of

outsider pride. Though changing their bodies would be like turning their backs on their friends and culture. Ultimately, The Quincees have to choose between being insiders in their own lives at home and with friends or being outsiders at school. Because of their strong cultural attachment they forge a positive cultural identity as Latinas. For The Quincees, trying to or wanting to emulate insiders at school may not be an option as their loyalties align with their Hispanic culture, no doubt magnifying the exclusion they feel as outsiders.

### *THE BELLES*

Upon entering Mr. Carter's English class, I sat down in the middle section of the room along the back wall. For the first few classes there were no students who stood out to me. Everyone seemed quiet, there were no strong personalities and the class was relatively eventless. I actually got a little worried. Would I be wasting my time? However, what I did not imagine was coming across a group of girls who would, as they got more comfortable in the class, draw my attention so predominantly.

The group of girls who drew my attention I identify as The Belles, who are freshman at VHS. They identify themselves as white students. And like many of the students who attend VHS, The Belles come from more affluent backgrounds. They live in neighborhoods in proximity to VHS where houses can currently sell for just under a million dollars. They talk about current fashion trends and celebrities; what they are wearing; weekend parties or activities such as going to the movies or on trips to New York City or skiing at Vail; and who they are dating, talking to or not talking to. They are

outgoing and personable and interacted with me as if I were another student in class. For these reasons the Belles became a focal point in my research.

Within several weeks one girl, Amanda, quickly drew my attention<sup>7</sup>. She is a petite, yet muscular, Italian girl with dark curly hair. She has a strong sense of style wearing fashionable shirts, jeans and a variety of boots commonly from stores such as Abercrombie & Fitch, Urban Outfitters, Charlotte Russe, Victoria's Secret and American Eagle. Rarely did I see her repeat outfits and she constantly changed the bags she carried from such designers as Coach, Dooney & Bourke or Vera Bradley over the months I was there. She is the loudest, most outspoken and animated of any of the girls in the classes I observed and is known to laugh at herself and others. Emma is the most opinionated of the group. She is barely five feet tall with dirty blonde hair. Emma is outspoken, but appears to move under Mr. Carter's radar most of the time. Allison is the blonde athlete of the group. She is also the tallest in the class- boys or girls. She initially comes across as the "do-gooder" focusing on her work, but I quickly notice her understated rebellious attitude. She, like Emma, moves under the radar and rarely is called out in class for crossing the line which is commonly done through facial expressions or body language and the ever-present mumblings. And then there is Carly, a petite blonde who is a competitive dancer at a local studio with Amanda. She is Amanda's polar opposite. She rarely talks out of turn; however her glances and facial expressions are very telling of her feelings. Carly could say nothing and the other girls appear to know what she is thinking,

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<sup>7</sup> Though there are several girls within The Belles, Amanda was the most prominent girl and voice in the group. For this reason, many of the scenarios play around or involve Amanda.

by her gestures alone. Together each one of these girls brings a different personality to the group that serves to create a dynamic identity for the girls as a whole.

On any given day the interactions and discussions between The Belles are very much centered on each other. For Amanda and Emma the outbursts and disruptions are more common. Consider this recording from my observations:

As Amanda looks up from her work and stands up at her desk she says, without raising her hand, “Mr. Carter totally off subject...I feel a song from HSM3 comin’ on.” Mr. Carter smirks. As he is walking back toward the center of the room Emma blurts, “I feel a lecture comin’ on.” Amanda turns slightly toward me and says, “he will always say something like ‘I feel a lecture comin’ on.’” Mr. Carter turns toward the girls and sternly says, “Ladies...” As he walks away he smirks. Immediately when he is no longer looking at them the girls try to imitate his smirk, as they commonly do after he turns away, and begin to giggle.

Situations like this, though rarely escalating, occurred regularly between the girls and Mr. Carter. The mocking of his smirk and mannerisms, throwing of notes at each other, and out-of-turn comments are a routine part of the day-to-day in Mr. Carter’s class. The Belles appear to relish in the idea that they draw attention. And the more time I spent in the classroom with them, the more I noticed The Belles are recognized largely based on attention.

### *The Belles & Their Bodies*

The attention these girls draw to themselves is not only about how they handle themselves in the space of the classroom, which I will discuss in a later chapter, but is about distinguishing themselves against other students. A great distinction between The Belles and The Quinces is the way in which they focus and view their bodies. Though



The Belles do identify make-up and clothing with “being a girl,” these things do not play such a vital role for them and is less likely to be the focus of their talk. It is quite apparent that The Belles and The Quinces have very different opinions about what being a girl means to them. In turn, The Belles also have a different perspective on girlhood and their bodies. When asked what being a girl means to them they were quick in their responses:

|          |   |
|----------|---|
| Amanda:  | Make-up. But it sucks, I hate being a girl.                                   |
| TC:      | Why?  |
| Allison: | So much work - wake up and go, and of course, you can't just get up and go.   |
| Emma:    | Why can't you do that? I could do that.                                       |
| Amanda:  | Because I would look like crap-- actually I get up and go sometimes.          |
| Allison: | My hair's worse than Amanda's, it's huge. I'm just saying...                  |
| Amanda:  | That was really mean. [Amanda smirks and laughs] Shut up, you're not kidding. |
| Emma:    | Don't cry, it doesn't work.   |
| Amanda:  | I can't pull that off. The lion needs to be tamed.                            |

For The Belles, the things that stereotypically make a girl a girl - doing make-up, hair and being concerned about clothing - are seen as bothersome and getting in the way of their everyday. Amanda and Allison see “being a girl” as something that “sucks” and is seen as “work.” Though Emma acknowledges that she can just get up and go there seems to be a consensus that wanting and doing are two different things. In their opinion they cannot simply “wake up and go” because if they did they would be “looking like crap.” However, despite this, make-up and hair appear to be more about work and less about it making them feel “girly” or “womanly.” In contrast, it appears that the things The

Quincees' love about being a girl is more about the hassle for The Belles and less about it identifying them as girls.

To the same effect, where appearance (clothing, make-up and hair) does not positively define what "being a girl" means to The Belles, the idea of "pressure" regarding their bodies seems to be the topic of much conversation. The pressure of being a girl and trying to be the ideal girl with the ideal body is very prominent and meaningful to The Belles. Unlike The Quincees, their discussions appear to be more about what they perceive as the ideal girl/body and how this affects what they idealize. As they quite openly discuss:

|          |   |
|----------|---|
| Emma:    | She [the ideal girl] would probably be 100 lbs.   |
| Amanda:  | Not even.   |
| Allison: | Less than 100 lbs. That's the average girl.   |
| Emma:    | Allison, don't talk about yourself like that.   |
| Allison: | I was talking about you.  |
| TC:      | I mean, is there a lot of pressure to...I don't know, like who's kind of the girl everybody wants to look like? |
| Emma:    | The ish <sup>8</sup> .  |
| TC:      | Did you say the ish?  |
| Emma:    | Yeah, I can't say that word. I think Lauren Conrad's pretty.  |
| Allison: | I don't like her.   |
| Emma:    | I do.   |
| Amanda:  | I like Demi Lovato.   |
| TC:      | Who's that?   |

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<sup>8</sup> The "ish" is a term The Belles use to substitute for "the shit."

Emma: She's going to shoot you if you ask her.

TC: No, really. Who is that?

Amanda: Demi Lovato - she sings with the Jonas Brothers.

The ideal girl, for The Belles, is someone who in certain terms is popular celebrities. The girls they mention are very much the popular blondes of MTV (Lauren Conrad) and brunettes of the Disney channel (Demi Lovato). These are girls, along with many others, with whom The Belles may be closely attached and reference through their days quite regularly. Lauren Conrad is a reality star on the MTV reality show's *Laguna Beach: The Real Orange County (LB)* and *The Hills*, which was created due to Conrad's popularity after *LB* ended. These shows followed the drama and fashion of Lauren and her friends who quickly became recognizable celebrities for living their lives on TV. Lauren's shows were quite controversial because of the subject matter and topics- sex, drinking, and partying- that many critics felt gave the wrong impression of what being a young woman was about. Demi Lovato was a break out star in Disney's *Camp Rock*, a popular Disney musical appearing alongside the Jonas Brothers, which lent itself to a family friendly audience. Her age and exposure in television and music lends itself to being more relatable to a broader range of girls (likely elementary to high school). In either case, Conrad and Lovato, who are thin, outgoing and attractive, are influential and idealized. Many girls, like The Belles, see these celebrities who have shows, music contracts, clothing lines, perfume and/or shoes as the "ish." The "ish" are the perfect girls they want to be like; which in turn validates the perceptions and feelings of what it means to be a girl (McSharry 2009). For the Belles, these celebrities are put in front of them and

portrayed as the ideal girl. Thus, celebrities become the girls The Belles feel they should idealize and strive to emulate.

However, the ideal girl, in the long run, was not just Conrad and Lovato, but someone much closer to The Belles. What quickly transpired in our interview was an open discussion on pressure, emulation and contradictions. As they discuss:

Emma: I think it's more pressure what you look like, because if you look good, but you act weird, people don't really say things; but if you act weird and look weird, then people are just like - what's wrong with that person. Like if a pretty girl does something that an ugly girl did, they'd probably look at the ugly girl, like - what the heck did you just say.

TC: What's considered to be pretty?

Amanda: Skinny. Long hair, a lot of makeup.

Emma: Cake face, I want to wear cake face next weekend.

Amanda: But not cake face.

TC: What's skinny for you guys?

Amanda: Not Carly. Not Carly-skinny, I mean. That's too skinny, and she eats.

Emma: Not Carly-skinny. Carly's too skinny, but yeah Carly eats.

Allison: I don't know.

Amanda: Yeah, Carly's really skinny.

What I find interesting is the ideal girl of less than 100 pounds they described earlier would lead me to believe that Carly would be the ideal girl. She is petite, blonde, thin (I would infer well under 100 pounds) yet active. This is not to say some of the other Belles are not under 100 pounds or close, but there seems to be this wavering interpretation of the ideal girl. Either they are less than 100 pounds (which would result in someone who

resembles Carly) or the ideal girl really is something quite different. The conversation then continues:

- TC: What is more important? Is it more about being --
- Allison: Like toned, not --
- Amanda: The perfect girl, for like, I don't know. Because I don't know how to say it, it's weird. They have to be pretty, skinny, athletic, funny, outgoing.
- TC: So the perfect girl really just needs to be everything?
- Amanda: Yeah, and that's the truth. But I haven't met anyone who's like perfect.

The Belles appear to know what/who a perfect girl is and say that it is unattainable, if they have never met someone who is perfect, yet appear to focus on Carly who fits all the attributes of perfect. At the same time, there is a contradiction between the ideal girl, the perfect girl and their friend Carly if none of them are the same person or resemble the same person. If the ideal girl is not the perfect girl and the perfect girl is not the ideal girl and neither girl describes Carly, is it because they feel it is unattainable or unrealistic? As Nitcher (2000: 19) states:

Ironically, girls who were closest to the image of the ideal were admired, but at the same time envied and disliked by other girls. The perfect girl makes those around her feel frustrated and insecure because they just don't measure up to her embodiment of the ideal.

To me, Carly appears to be the girl they describe as perfect. As a dancer, Carly is toned and athletic; she is petite and skinny; and she is also pretty with long blonde hair and clear fair skin. Though she is quiet in the classroom, through conversations between all the girls she seems to be social and is well liked. She fits all the characteristics of the

ideal and/or perfect girl, but The Belles seem to find the one caveat for why she is not perfect. She is too skinny. She is perfectly imperfect. Since Carly is their friend they need to find a way of making her a little less perfect because for them perfect is unattainable. And being friends with a *perfect* girl is difficult when they feel it is a standard they can never meet. With that said, because they are also hyperaware of what being too skinny means The Belles are quick to clarify that despite Carly being too skinny “she eats.” This clarification distances Carly from any assumption that she might have an eating disorder<sup>9</sup> while possibly distancing them from feelings of guilt for passing judgment. Because perfect is unrealistic for Amanda, Emma and Allison they want to keep the one person (Carly) who is perfect at arm’s length.

They all agreed the ideal girl is skinny. They also say the perfect girl has to be everything. And because they associate the ideal girl with celebrities they admire, distancing themselves from the one girl who emulates it the most may make perfect seem realistic. In so many cases, perfect is its own pressure and The Belles appear to be bound by the image of the perfect and ideal girl. Because they may not feel they emulate either the ideal or the perfect girl, their interpretation of “what it means to be a girl” is riddled with contradictions and confusion.

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<sup>9</sup> It is important to note that just prior to this interview Amanda and Carly had a discussion about a friend, whom they dance with, whose mom thinks Amanda is not eating enough. As the discussion broke down : Amanda says to Carly, “did you see her at the studio? She didn’t say one word to me.” Amanda continues, “Susan’s mom is worried about me. She called my mom crying saying that I am not eating enough...obviously I am” as she points at her stomach.

### *The Ideal and Idealized*

Together The Quinces and The Belles have their own perspective of what it means to be a girl. For each girl or group of girls their meanings are very much individualized. The Quinces are confident in who they are and relish in their bodies as they are. As Aapola, et al (2005: 157) states the body “can also be a very positive site of self-expression, identity-creation and enjoyment.” This is very much reflected in how The Quinces see themselves. Perfect, maybe not, but to them curves and boobs have meaning in their development into women. For them it is more about becoming a woman than it is about reflecting someone else’s expectations. There is an attraction to reflecting or at least appreciating what they have and where they “get” it from. They see their bodies as an extension of their family, and whether or not they love what they have, there appears to be a sense of acceptance for their physical assets. Though in their opinions their bodies may not be perfect, the discussion was never centered on the perfect as much as it was on the reality of what was in front of them; the reality of their current self and that of becoming a woman.

On the other hand, The Belles view girlhood and their bodies in relation to other girls by engaging in constant comparisons. They see and admire who the ideal girls are and they talk about wanting to emulate these ideal girls, but at the same time distancing themselves from those girls whom they associate as being ideal. In this instance Carly appears to be the girl they describe. Even though Carly is one of their best friends, and whether or not her lack of presence in the interview played a role, The Belles idealized

the type of girl Carly is while finding a way to distance her from what they see as ideal or perfect. Yes, they care about clothing and how they look, but much of their focus is outward, more on who they are not than who they were. The Belles appear to be bound by the images they see in the media and the ideals that have been set for them as the perfect girl. The Belles appear to be in a battle of who they are, who they desire to be, and who they are not.

What all these girls do, however, is give a voice to their individualized understanding of their bodies and who they are as a girl. Between The Quinces and The Belles the contrast among the groups is very distinct. Where The Belles focus their attention on the perfect body and image; The Quinces simply do not engage in the same talk. Each girl has their own interpretation of what being a girl means to them and what their bodies represent to that meaning. Just as importantly there is an emphasis between the groups, though differing, about how they view their bodies and what it represents to them. As Brumberg (1998: 97) explains:

Although girls in the past and present display many common developmental characteristics- such as self-consciousness, sensitivity to peers, and an interest in establishing an independent identity...Today, many young girls worry about the contours of their bodies- especially shape, size, and muscle tone- because they believe that the body is the ultimate expression of the self.

And in the case of both The Quinces and The Belles, their bodies are used as a means to express who they are and what they think of themselves. It is an instance of contrast- curvy versus skinny. The Quinces talk about having big boobs and big booties in a way that lends itself to describing a womanly figure. On the other hand, The Belles see the



perfect body as skinny; and skinny in simple terms means having a girl figure, which is seen by many as nonsexual. Unlike The Quinces, The Belles are concerned about the lack of shape, about being 100 pounds or less. In any case, curvy or skinny, these girl's bodies represent the ultimate expression of self. And whether or not they see themselves as ideal or they idealize the image of what they want, these girls provide a voice for their interpretation of what it means to be a girl for each of them.

## 5: THE CLASSROOM SPACE: BOUNDARIES BETWEEN ACADEMIC AND SOCIAL SPACE

One thing is for certain, school is a site for learning. Students go to school, attend classes and take tests with an eventual goal to graduate and possibly go to college. But what is also certain is that schools are sites where students socialize. This may sound like a paradox in one's own understanding of what school is supposed to represent, but the reality is the environment is organized in such a way that school facilitates a connection between the academic and the social relationship with students. School not only educates students through learning; it educates them about social behavior, meanings and understandings of social life in a way that cannot be learned in a book.

The boundaries between the academic and social<sup>10</sup> aspect of school can easily be blurred. The classroom is not just a site for learning; it is a site where students meet friends, forge relationships, and learn how to *play* well with others. As Zerubavel (1991:6) states, "Examining how we partition our space, therefore, is an ideal way to start exploring how we partition our social world." In many cases the classroom is not an all or nothing environment. In any given classroom, teachers may allow students to sit wherever they want, share tables with friends, and even encourage small and large group

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<sup>10</sup> For the purposes of my research and analysis social is not just referring to the act of socialization, it is also the act of being social in a way that can challenge normative behaviors by talking loudly, talking out of turn, and talking in a way that challenges the roles of both teachers and other students.

work all while completing class assignments. This shows us that the boundaries within school are intertwined; with the academic aspect of school, there is also the social.

### *PLAYING WITH BOUNDARIES: THE QUINCES*

School is a space that represents something more than just grades, tests and other academic ventures. The Quinces seem to characterize the constant state of flux regarding learning and socializing in school. It is not that one aspect is more important than the other; to the contrary, The Quinces view school as a tool to achieve success while also creating friendships.

For the Quinces, they appear to be aware of the importance of getting an education. Their initial conversation about school highlights their aspirations of what an education means to them. As they discuss:

TC: When you guys said the good part of school is education, what do you think is good about the education?

Sara: Because when you get older, you can get a better job, and stuff like that. If you don't get an education, you'll get a low-paying job.

TC: Now, what do you guys want to do when you grow up?

Cammi: I want to become a lawyer or maybe go into nursing.

TC: And you?

Rari: I want to be a psychologist.

Sara: I was thinking about being a psychologist, too; but my mom, she's like - why do you want to be that - so I'm not sure yet.

As a whole, The Quinces have aspirations to go to college and there seems to be an understanding that in order to succeed they need to do well in school. They have an idea, as well as any freshmen would, of what they want to do with their education and that in order to be successful they need to get a good education.

Though The Quinces were still very young and their choices may change, these girls appear to have a voice regarding their success. By this I mean to suggest, they talk about college and future aspiration. Success for these girls may be a relative term. For some students success in school can be viewed as doing well in class and not failing, while for others success is based on getting an “A” in the more advanced or college-prep classes. In most cases just doing well or passing a class is not enough. However, for The Quinces there is a reality in place that in order to go to college one must do more than simply consider taking AP and/or Pre-AP classes. During one class period I listened to Cammi, Sara, Rari and Lakisha talk about AP and Pre-AP classes:

Cammi says, “You have to pay for AP and Pre-AP class now.” Sara responds, “na-huh.” Lakisha says, “I think you only have to pay for the test if you want to take it.” Rari continues, “Well if I am taking the class why wouldn’t I want to take the test for credit?” They continue to talk about what types of classes they would take if they were able to take AP classes. Rari mentions taking psychology or the forensic science class while Lakisha mentioned English. Cammi and Sara do not really talk about taking any particular AP class simply that if they want to be successful they need to take more advanced classes. Sara finally says, “I do not think I could afford those tests.”

A reality for The Quinces is that as outsiders in the school they have mixed feelings about taking more advanced classes. They also lack the knowledge regarding what may or may not be required to take AP or Pre-AP classes. The Quinces question if there is a financial

issue without actually knowing; which further suggests their unfamiliarity with the more advanced educational requirements.

Though financially, taking advanced classes may create an issue for them<sup>11</sup>, the fact they were entertaining the idea says something for their aspirations. Many of these girls aspire to be more than just an average student. However, if classes require that they pay for the exam or incur additional costs, it is possible that enrolling would be unrealistic for some of them. Despite The Quinces' belief that there was a financial limitation regarding advanced classes, the reality that they had such high academic goals should not be dismissed. It simply makes success, in comparison to others who may not be financially limited, a little more difficult to obtain. Even if money was taken out of the equation, the question still remains as to whether or not they could do the work and spend the required time focusing on just one class.

However, there is a much bigger picture to consider. If The Quinces have a desire to go to college, why are they in Family & Life and not a Pre-AP class? Family & Life is not traditionally a class for college track students<sup>12</sup>. It is part of Family & Consumer Sciences, which can count toward the Fine & Practical Arts requirement. This class is also a prerequisite for a certificate in Career and Technical Education not likely earned by students striving to go to college. Ultimately, by taking Family & Life as a freshman, it

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<sup>11</sup> During the 2008/2009 school year there was much discussion and debate as to whether the county could afford to pay for all the AP exams and whether or not they would need to charge students for the class to offset some extra costs AP classes normally incur expenses (ie. paper, classroom supplies, and books) that are not required by other classes within the school. At the same time there was discussion to charge all athletes \$50 to play sports. In 2011 this discussion still continues, though other counties in the area have implemented the pay-to-play policy. However, I have not seen the implementation of pay-to-take AP classes.

<sup>12</sup> This is not passing personal judgment, rather a fairly common understanding.

begins a track they are unaware of, where AP and Pre-AP classes are not commonly taken. The overall picture is that The Quinces do not know what they do not know. They talk about college and success, yet are not taking the classes which would help them develop the academic skills/tools to get to college, much less be as successful as they desire.

In the Family & Life class it is also important to note that The Quinces were in a classroom environment that encouraged group work and peer discussion almost every day. No, I do not believe this is standard across the board, but Mrs. Adams, The Quinces' teacher, encouraged group work because "it helps students talk out their opinions and to hear the opinions of others" and for students who may be "slower learners" it allows them to take part in a conversation without feeling pressure of having to talk in front of the whole class. Based on what Mrs. Adams has said her class does not appear to lend itself to those students who would stereotypically take AP or Pre-AP classes. Mrs. Adams harbored a more social atmosphere than many other teachers, and in turn appeared to encourage the social over the academic. Again, reiterating the fact that Family & Life does not lend itself to AP or college track students.

For the Quinces, a desire for academic success may be easily overshadowed by their overt socialness and ability to artfully play with social and academic boundaries. Students who are considered too social may be seen as caring less about their education, which may affect how teachers and peers view them in the classroom. When it comes to

playing with classroom boundaries, Cammi<sup>13</sup> was commonly the outspoken girl of the group. In class, Cammi was routinely the last to finish her work. She was normally texting or writing notes and sometimes putting on make-up. She has also been seen carrying on long conversations about clothes, parents, other friends, or guys with the other Quinces. In turn, Cammi was not always the most productive worker. It was not uncommon with about 5 minutes left in class for Cammi to start work on her assignments:

Cammi asks Lakisha, who is almost always the first one done, for help by reading all the questions and saying, “what does that mean... give me an example?” Lakisha may rattle off some thoughts and answers quickly, but never taking enough time for Cammi to copy exactly what she was saying. Cammi commonly would ask, “Can you repeat that?” But Lakisha would just move on. Cammi would get into a panic answering the questions quickly, while trying to convince the girls to help her. As the bell rings Cammi brings the assignment up to Mrs. Adams’ desk and turns it in. Nothing more is said about the assignment and there is very little discussion about how she thinks she is going to do. The girls pack their bags and head out the door talking and laughing.

Though the other girls talk while in class, and a number of times out of turn, most of the time it was not to the detriment of finishing their work. Rarely did the girls have incomplete assignments; however, it was not unusual to see Cammi struggling at the last minute to finish whatever was due by the end of class. Cammi allowed for the social behaviors she exhibited- texting, talking and doing her hair and make-up- to overshadow her work. The other Quinces, managed to balance the social and academic aspects of school more skillfully.

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<sup>13</sup> She is the Amanda-type for The Quinces.

The Quinces also saw the classroom as a site to forge new friendships and expand on those that had already developed. To them, school was seen as a place for social growth and to be successful they must make new friends. As we discuss:

- TC: When you were doing the time line project of the big events in your lives, and you had to group them by what type of growth it was, I noticed that most of you in class put school as social growth versus intellectual growth. I was wondering why you see your education as social growth versus intellectual growth.
- Sara: To school? Because you figure yourself out and meet new people at school...
- Cammi: ...and you think you know them, but you don't - they just surprise you. You meet new people that you can learn a lot from.
- Rari: Usually the old friends that you had a long time ago, you meet new people. Each year you make new friends.
- Cammi: That's why you try to hold your best friends, or the new friends that you have, just keep them with you.

No matter the intended role of school one important aspect is being able to meet new friends and acquaintances. Though friends may change over time, school allows The Quinces to grow with old/best friends while learning from and making new friends. In regards to The Quinces, their friendship flourished in the Family & Life class, but it expanded outside of school as well. Whether it is the academic that brought together the social or the social which attempts to enhance the academic, The Quinces are in a situation where the lines between the two are very much blurred.

The Quinces seem to have a subconscious understanding of their future realities. They are aware of the options available; however, partaking in them does not seem as



vital to their success or enjoyment in school as meeting new friends. The Quinceañeras play between the academic and social boundaries extremely well. They have a distinct understanding of what each boundary means. However, The Quinceañeras judge the meaning of school socially based on friends and not so much about grades; which means their understanding for how success in school is measured is skewed. Their dedication to academics appears to be at a superficial level, obviously lacking the understanding of what it takes to get into college. At this point in time, they don't know that they are not on track to attend college; they simply discuss their future aspirations without much effort to "make them happen."

#### *BLURRED BOUNDARIES: THE BELLES*

When it comes to playing with boundaries, The Belles appear to exemplify the play between the academic and social aspects of school; though they are certainly not the only group to outright challenge the boundaries. The Belles seem to continually blur being social in a manner that challenges normative behavioral expectations, with that of academic prospects.

Case in point. Mr. Carter, their English teacher, rarely allows for group work and commonly enforces a "no talking rule." Almost every day he reprimands students for talking out of turn, talking too loud or even talking at all; and it would not be surprising for Amanda to be one of those students. The encouragement for group work was rarely supported; however, this did not appear to discourage The Belles from their group

behaviors. Amanda, the most outspoken in the group, had no problem cracking a joke or mocking Mr. Carter to the other girls or to the entire class for that matter.

There was one class in particular where Mr. Carter left the room to talk to another student who was sent into the hallway after being disruptive. Amanda looking to Emma and Allison says, mimicking Mr. Carter with her hands on her hips and scrunching her face, “There’s something wrong with him.” She quickly followed up while holding back a laugh “I think I feel a lecture coming on.” This statement, said in spite by The Belles, mocked Mr. Carter’s method of both instructing and reprimanding the class as a whole<sup>14</sup>. The girls, as Mr. Carter would change his stance and fold his arms in a clear sign he was about to “lecture,” appeared to take it upon themselves to alert the class of Mr. Carter’s actions. The Belles use this mocking as a way to claim this classroom as their space. They imitate Mr. Carter, talk out of turn, and ultimately over time begin to show a lack of respect for the academic setting of the classroom and their teacher.

The Belles’ assumptions that they have the right to dictate their position within the classroom or have a say in how the class should be run blurs the role of student and teacher. These assumptions also assist in blurring the line between the social and academic boundaries in the classroom. As a result of the blurred boundaries and roles, the relationship between The Belles and Mr. Carter is a contentious one. Academically, The Belles are getting good grades and completing most assignments in a timely manner;

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<sup>14</sup> The Belles routinely verbalized when they felt Mr. Carter was about to “lecture” the class. The Belles felt Mr. Carter lectured about everything to include: class rules, assignments, behavior, rationale for why he was teaching what he was teaching or doing what he was doing. (As an observer, and student myself, I felt Mr. Carter did not teach to the students enough, rather lectured or talked to/through them. And because of this, I believe The Belles quickly began challenging almost everything he would do, say or even assign.)

however they challenge the standard expectations of girls in the classroom by being loud, outspoken and defying the authoritative structure.

The Belles are not only blunt and boisterous about their feelings amongst themselves; they are also the same with Mr. Carter and other students. As one event plays out in the classroom:

Emma looks up from her desk and turns around to face Amanda and Allison when she says, "Did you do the questions before or after you read?" Amanda looks up with a smirk, "huh?" Allison says, "I have already finished this book..." Emma responds, "Overachiever." Allison replies, "At least I do my work." Mr. Carter walks over and says to Emma while pointing at the worksheet they had for homework, "do you think this will really work?" Emma replies, "What?" Amanda quickly says, "I feel a lecture coming on?" Mr. Carter replies "no lecture this time...I gave you credit, but don't expect that next time." Mr. Carter continues to explain that if they took the time to do their homework at home like Allison and Carly they would not have this problem. Amanda says, "I...probably got an 'F'." However, the grade on the paper is a B. Shortly after Amanda asks for Allison's book because she has notes and highlights. Amanda says, "Can I see your sheet?" Allison responds, "Just read it..." Amanda says looking at Emma, "she is saying I don't..." Emma quickly interrupts her saying, "just answer it on your own."

For Amanda and Emma their interactions with Mr. Carter and the other Belles were not about not doing the work; their actions were about doing the work with little or no effort. The irony is, as a whole, the girls played down the importance of doing well, but actually cared about their overall success.

For The Belles, there appears to be an assumed expectation about their success—that success should be afforded to them despite their behavior in the classroom and attitudes about school work. They are successful students, but it seems to happen on their terms, which they make known to Mr. Carter and their peers. The Belles want what they

want when they want it. They portray an assumed sense of entitlement fighting against the rules set in place by those in authority. However, they appear to fight harder when those in authority, Mr. Carter, try to take control in the classroom without a legitimate claim.

Out of all The Belles, I believe Amanda was the most successful at manipulating situations in order to get her way. Though there were many instances where Amanda challenges Mr. Carter, this particular episode altered the dynamic of The Belles in the classroom:

Before the bell rings at the start of class Amanda brings up to the other Belles about Mr. Carter calling her house at 8am Monday morning. Amanda, talking to the girls, looks at Mr. Carter and says in a serious tone, and with a smirk on her face, "I got blamed for it... and it was another teachers fault." She continues, "My mom called me from a friends and made me come home." Amanda then asks Mr. Carter, "Did you call anyone else?" Mr. Carter says, "Yes... anyone who had not turned in their paper or mid-term." Amanda quickly responds in what appears to be an upset but dramatic- hands moving and body shifting in the seat- manner, "I did turn it in." Mr. Carter follows up, "If you had done it right the first time..." Amanda responds, "But... you said I could email it..." Mr. Carter interrupts, "because I worked with you since you couldn't get it to me like everyone else." Brendan, one of the guys who sits near The Belles, says to Amanda, "you are being pretty critical." He quickly hides his face in his sweatshirt hood while continuing, "I mean Mr. Carter is pretty organized." Mr. Carter continues, "You can meet me after school from now on when you know you can't get something in to me as requested." Amanda says, "but... you said I could email it." Mr. Carter points to her calendar, "Why don't you write me little sticky notes to remind me. I have over 100 students and I missed one email. I'm sorry." Amanda looks surprised, "Yeah well I got in trouble." Mr. Carter says, "I'm sorry, but had you turned it in like it was assigned this would have never happened." Amanda says, "I can't do it because..." Mr. Carter interrupts her thought, "well I can take you out of dance so you have time." Mr. Carter looks at Amanda before walking away says, "I worked with you. Now you need to work with me."

Even when Mr. Carter walks away, Amanda continues to mumble, huff and sigh talking to The Belles about how unfair Mr. Carter was being to her. Amanda's attitude quickly turned from upbeat to annoyed and reclusive. She would slouch in her chair, kick her feet under the desk in front of her, and loudly move books and bags around. Amanda appeared shocked that Mr. Carter even challenged her. She did not want to fail an assignment or get in trouble at home and she certainly did not want to be pulled from dance. Ironically, the issue for Amanda did not appear to be the late assignment because she was not being penalized for her late work; it was the fact Mr. Carter called her house and brought to her mother's attention work that was not done as assigned. This situation elicits the sense of entitlement Amanda feels and exemplifies her inability to understand Mr. Carter's rationalization.<sup>15</sup>

Unlike the rest of The Belles, Amanda challenges authority upfront and out loud. This was not to say the other Belles did not have similar feelings, but they simply did not vocalize them in the same way. On any other given day, Amanda and The Belles seem to manage the social and academic boundaries quite well. They routinely tested how far a boundary could be pushed, backing down before situations escalated too far. Never had Amanda's behavior created such a contentious environment or come to a breaking point as it had with this particular incident.

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<sup>15</sup> Mr. Carter was not deducting points for the mix-up. He was more or less conceding to the fact the assignment was missed.

## *INTERACTIONS AND INFRACTIONS: VOICES WITHIN THE CLASSROOM SPACE*

### *Interactions Lead to Frustrations*

In the space of the classroom there are defining moments that shape how students perceive themselves amongst others. Many of these moments are defined by how well they do in class, while other moments are defined by the interactions between students and peers or students and teachers. In the case of The Quinces their interactions with others in the space of the classroom has led to frustrations regarding race and ethnicity. For the girls, the classroom, despite begin a rather diverse school, was a contentious space regarding ethnicity and expectations. As we discuss in the interview:

- TC: What do you guys think about your classes? Honestly, what do you guys think about your classes, your teachers, the kids in your class?
- Cammi: For me, I have some bad teachers. They think we're like the richest family ever, and we can buy a lot of stuff - and it's not true. We have problems in some classes. Some classes are really boring, they just tell you what to do, but they don't show you that much. They think that if you see, you just get it. And some students, some people are nice and some of them [students and teachers] are just like out of it.
- TC: What do you mean by out of it?
- Cammi: Like they really don't care about anything. I don't know why they go to school or teach.

For Cammi there are feelings that assumptions are made about them simply because they attend VHS and that they are “the richest family.” These assumptions place expectations on her that she should be able to afford all the expenses necessary to be successful in school. Expenses for extra activities and projects or even something as simple as having a

printer at home to print assignments<sup>16</sup> are not afforded to The Quinces like they are to other students (or The Belles).

There was also a sense of frustration from The Quinces regarding how they connect to their teachers. Cammi expressed her issues that teachers just “tell you” and do not “show you” what to do in the classroom. Whether their frustrations have to do specifically with a cultural or language difference between The Quinces and their teachers, a lack of guidance at home, or the difference in being college or non-college track; there was an assumption made by Cammi that teachers and students do not care about them. The reality may be that The Quinces’ expectations of their teachers are different from the treatment they actually receive in class. I believe these frustrations stem from an expectation that as students, they need guidance and it is a teacher’s responsibility to “show” and guide them in the classroom.

At the same time, The Quinces voice their frustration about students from their cultural backgrounds dropping out of school. They see this as a poor reflection on them. As our discussion continues:

|        |  |
|--------|--|
| Cammi: | Yeah, like most - this generation, people are dropping out.  |
| TC:    | Are they?  |
| Cammi: | A lot.   |
| TC:    | Do you guys see that a lot?  |
| Sara:  | Not from this school, but some just get pregnant and they leave, or they don't like school and they just drop out. |

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<sup>16</sup> The issue over being able to “print” was referenced earlier by The Quinces.

TC: What do you guys think about that?

Sara: I think it's dumb.

TC: Why?

Rari: Because you've been going to school all of these years, why would you drop out right when you're about to finish. But they look at me and think I'm a drop out.

However, the assumption about students dropping out was not based on fact<sup>17</sup>. I believe it was based on The Quinces internalizing what others (peers, teachers or media) are saying about Hispanic students. In this case, The Quinces' frustrations are based on a misperception of assumptions they believe are made by others. Despite what The Quinces and others believe to be the reality of Hispanic students in school, the girls express that many students and teachers are still not in touch with their lives and the lives of their Hispanic peers.

Unlike other students at VHS, The Quinces as outsiders are not afforded the same privileges as their more affluent peers. This lack of opportunity can result in classroom situations that typify the stereotypes others may have of them based on their minority status; which lowers the ceiling of academic expectation for success. These are frustrations that play out for The Quinces in the classroom and shape their interactions with others. As Cammi continues in our discussion:

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<sup>17</sup> U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (2011) shows that the dropout rates of 16 to 24 year olds (White, Black, and Hispanic) have all continued to drop since 1990. The Hispanic rate has seen the most dramatic drop. In 2007 the rate was 21.4 percent and in 2009 it was 17.6 percent (National Center for Education Statistics. 2011. U.S. Department of Education. August, 3, 2011. [http://www.nationsreportcard.gov/hsts\\_2009/gender\\_gpa.asp?tab\\_id=tab1&subtab\\_id=Tab\\_1#chart](http://www.nationsreportcard.gov/hsts_2009/gender_gpa.asp?tab_id=tab1&subtab_id=Tab_1#chart)



TC: How do you feel other students treat you in class?

Cammi: Some of them treat you good, but like some are like... because you're Spanish and you don't know nothing. I don't hold back on that - if they give me a comment, like...

TC: What do they say?

Cammi: Just because she's Mexican, she cannot do nothing, she can just go clean the toilets and everything. I don't hold myself back.

TC: At that moment, how does that make you feel?

Cammi: It makes me feel really angry, just like punching that person.

Interactions such as these are voiced quite commonly by The Quincees, though, not once did I witness this behavior in the one classroom setting where I observed them. Yet, despite my lack of exposure to their racial frustrations, Cammi was not the only girl to voice this opinion. As Sara and Rari continue:

Sara: Once, in one of my classes, this guy made a comment - because our teacher asked us why we needed to understand other languages; and the guy says - so we can understand people at McDonalds - that was racial.

TC: And how did that make you feel at that moment?

Sara: It made me really angry. And then everybody was really angry at him too.

TC: And for you?

Rari: I mean, in middle school, 7th grade there was - I went to a different school, and there was this one girl that told my friend, because she was Mexican, and then she was like - oh yeah, you're a dirty Mexican, go back to your country. She got so mad. So when we got out of class, she pushed her into the locker - my friend pushed her; and then my friend ended up getting in trouble, but she was just so mad.

The frustration for The Quinces was very real and intense. The racial interactions they appear to describe are not only based on poorly characterized assumptions of Hispanics, they create a contentious environment within the school.

Despite the negative interactions within the classroom space, The Quinces appeared willing to work through their frustrations. Many of the day-to-day exchanges they have with other peers are seen to lead to a commonly felt frustration of the “us versus them” mentality. The Quinces voice what they see and feel in the space of school, however, it does not necessarily change their reality of being considered outsiders. Regardless of the outright preference the girls feel is given to other students in school, they are able to justify- whether they should or not- the behaviors they witness in the classroom. For Cammi the treatment she receives appears to be different in comparison to the other Quinces. She acknowledges the reality that she, and other students like her, are treated unfairly in the classroom. As Cammi explains:

Cammi: ...Last year, there was this - I'm not going to be racist, but there was this American girl that she was like pure white, and the teacher loved her. And then we're like most Hispanic, and nothing, we always got bad grades and everything.

TC: Now when you say American, what does that mean to you?

Cammi: They have different opinions. It's hard to explain, like, how the concept is, how you look at it.

TC: Look at what?

Cammi: Like, some people are educated differently, and the knowledge - my friends that aren't from where I'm from, they have different visuals. Their parents educate them different than us.

I believe it is not that The Quinces cannot be successful; it is that the opportunities and privileges afforded to them are different both in the classroom and at home. And much like their aspirations to go to college do not fall in line with their current academic track, as Cammi acknowledges, there is a difference in the education they receive. As the girls continue:

- Rari: I mean they [white students] probably know more because of their parents. Their parents probably help them - I mean, for us, we just - the only place we can learn is school, because at home our parents don't know that experience, English and stuff.
- Sara: Yeah, so it's only school where we can learn stuff. They know stuff like, I don't know, from where, maybe their parents teach them - like they'll say vocabulary words and stuff, and we're probably like what does that mean. So it's kind of hard.
- Cammi: Yeah, like intellectual or whatever, like they [teachers] just think we're really - like we don't know those things.
- Sara: Some teachers will think, not to be racist, but the white people are smarter than us Hispanics and all that...

The Quinces voice their frustrations in a manner that not only exemplifies their understanding of the challenges they face, but also rationalizes where everyone else stands. As a group, the girls are very cognizant of what they lack at home and the drawback of not having the same advantages as their middle-class peers. The Quinces verbalized what Annette Lareau (2003: 129) states so clearly, "In a society in which children must attend school, and in which those schools privilege vocabulary, knowledge, and reasoning, middle-class children...accrue benefits, even forms of 'capital' from the language training they receive in the course of daily life." In comparison to other

students, The Quinces do not feel they have a voice in the classroom because they are “less educated” and have less at-home education, which plays into the assumptions they feel are made about them by others. Despite the obvious challenges they face, the girls appeared to understand that many students are given opportunities they are not afforded and those opportunities then transfer back into the classroom.

For The Quinces the classroom is a contested space. It is a space for learning. It is a space that presents hurdles regarding race, ethnicity and opportunity. School is a space where assumptions are made about who they are and in turn what they can achieve. Despite the fact these girls have interactions that may lead to frustrations in the classroom; they are willing and wanting to learn. They have expressed a desire to go to college, but as a result of their current academic track and (lack of) economic support, this is less of a reality for them. As Annette Lareau (2003: 248) states:

Parents’ economic resources helped create the class difference  
...Children’s activities are expensive. A \$25 enrollment fee, which  
middle-class parents dismissed...was a formidable expense for all poor  
families and many in the working class. The enrollment fee was just the  
tip of the iceberg.

This is a reality in place for girls like The Quinces. As Lareau’s research suggests, middle-class kids have an advantage to be successful as a result of their parents’ economic status. If the thought of taking a Pre-AP or AP class creates distress for The Quinces, it would be unrealistic to think college would be any easier or doable. However, just because they are Hispanic does not mean they are unable to succeed; it simply requires that they have to work a little harder to break down those barriers that are there to hold them back in order to succeed.

### *Infractions and (inter)actions*

The main difference between The Quinces and the Belles is the use and perceptions of the classroom space. As addressed earlier, The Belles come into the classroom with more assumptions of success and privilege than The Quinces. They are also routinely afforded more opportunities because of their economic status (Lareau 2003) and academic track. Some would say they are given more freedom based on their position in school. Others might say they are more entitled to get what they want when they want it.

As Mrs. Lewis, a gym teacher who allowed me to observe her class states, “kids have it so much harder these days.” When I ask her why she thinks this she says, “They have things easy, but the pressures and expectations to be number one make life more difficult for them.” Mrs. Lewis continues to tell me that she feels many of the students feel “a sense of entitlement.” Before we walk out to the gym Mrs. Lewis begins to tell me and Mrs. Taylor, another gym teacher, about a situation that supports her thoughts on student entitlement. She tells us about a girl in another class who was “complaining about her grades<sup>18</sup> and the fact she earned a C+. The girl’s mother has been emailing me and the principal. It appears the fact the syllabus and all classroom instruction [and assignments] are on the school website is not enough. She was absent and did not make up the assignments. Because of this she received a C+.” Mrs. Lewis continues “if these kids do not get what they want or the answer they want they will do anything to get it. Even if it means getting administration, parents, or other teachers involved. The students feel entitled to anything they want.” That afternoon Mrs. Lewis had to meet with the student, her mother and the principal.

What Mrs. Lewis explained to me was exactly what I had observed in Mr. Carter’s class with Amanda, Emma, Allison and Carly. The Belles and their parents, in this matter,

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<sup>18</sup> What I discovered was this student would have been considered a Belle for my research. She was actually friends with Emma (and Amanda) and they were both in the class prior to the one I observed with Mrs. Lewis.

have a perceived voice of entitlement and appear to feel they hold a position of authority not necessarily granted to them. As Lareau (2003: 242) states, “In crucial ways, middle-class family members appeared reasonably comfortable and entitled” regarding their interactions with those in authority. These girls challenge authority and do so until they are challenged with opposition. It was this behavior that creates a space where interactions, between peers and teachers, turns into something of a contested experience. When interactions with The Belles become contentious, the space of the classroom and the behavior of the girls become a battle of negotiations and challenges of authority.

*“It’s Just Not Fair”: The Breaking Down of Interactions*

What follows is my analysis of an event that took place over several weeks, but managed to change the dynamic of the classroom between The Belles and Mr. Carter. It will exemplify one’s understanding of how the actions and interactions between the girls play into their perceived role within the classroom. Though the Belles as a whole were present during the incident, which was fair to call it, it was very much centered on Amanda and Mr. Carter. Amanda, as I have addressed previously, is outgoing, excitable and thoroughly enjoys being around people, better known as a social butterfly. She appears to have very few inhibitions and insecurities. However, what developed over the last half of the year was a change in the normal interactions and behaviors of the girls. Over several classes Mr. Carter became increasingly frustrated and Amanda more willingly challenged any opposition that got in her way.

Like any other day in Mr. Carter's class there were several assignments on the board for the students to work on. After the bell rings Mr. Carter addressed the class and instructed them on the assignments. He tells the students to spend the time before lunch working individually on the reading and that some group work might follow. As they began doing work Mr. Carter attempted to quiet the class several times:

However, Amanda is still mumbling and making noises. Mr. Carter turns sharply saying, "Amanda, stop talking." She responds, "I haven't said anything." Mr. Carter follows up with "well you are making noises." With a huff, a quick drop of her shoulders and a roll of her eyes Amanda sharply follows up with "okay okay I'll keep my mouth shut." While Amanda was still mumbling Mr. Carter says "let's start practicing now."

This was one of the first times all year I witnessed, the typically even-tempered Mr. Carter voice his frustrations. Normally, he would tell her to be quiet and she would continue whispering or mumbling. However, on this particular day, Amanda continues talking and behaving in a manner unacceptable for Mr. Carter.

After several minutes Amanda gets up and walks over to Mr. Carter's desk to ask for a tissue. As she shuffles her feet along the floor looking back at the other Belles she begins to snicker with her nose in the tissue. Emma starts to giggle. Mr. Carter says loudly "Amanda, sit." Amanda follows with "OMG... oh wait... Oh my God." He gives her a sharp look. Amanda picks up her feet, blows her nose loudly and heads back to her desk. As Amanda sits down she looks at Mr. Carter with a smirk and a huff "I'll start...It would be easier if you weren't staring at me." She is referencing Mr. Carter's request to stop talking.

As their discussion continues I look around the classroom and notice The Belles are not looking at Amanda and many of the other students have their eyes glued to whatever is on their desk. As Amanda throws herself into her desk she mumbles "creeper."<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> As defined by Amanda "A creeper is someone who watches you constantly, just a weird person that you don't get along with...He is a weird person you try to avoid."

She continues to whisper loudly, talk back under her breath, and move dramatically around in her seat. She begins drawing attention to herself and more importantly to the group of girls sitting around her who, based on their body language, appeared to not want to get involved with Amanda and Mr. Carter.

Though The Belles are routinely the center of Mr. Carter's attention this incident appears to bring them to the center of his frustrations. Though Allison and Carly tend to be quiet in comparison to Amanda and Emma, as a group, their interactions quickly became a breaking point for Mr. Carter. As the events in class continue:

Once Amanda settles herself down Mr. Carter informs the girls that "next class you choose your own seats, but not next to each other." There is no response just a snicker and an eye roll from Amanda. Mr. Carter looks back up at them and says, "Did you hear me?" Amanda mumbles, "Don't worry I'm not coming next class." She giggles. Mr. Carter looks up again glaring.

For about another minute Amanda was the only voice to be heard. When Mr. Carter stands up from behind his desk Amanda abruptly quiets down and lowers herself down into her desk hunching her shoulders over. This response seems to illustrate an intention to back down. However, Amanda's reaction of submission appears to be superficial. As soon as Mr. Carter turns away to talk with another student, she continues to make noise and move around in her desk, as large, loud and obvious as possible. Consequently, Amanda's attempts to insert her authority into the situation are quickly met by Mr. Carter's threat of moving the girls to new seats. This likely only increases her willingness to challenge Mr. Carter, as he has only ever exerted his authority temporarily, as the girls shared with me during our interview:



Amanda: He always does that. "I moved you guys all the way" and then he'll be like, "I'm going to put you guys in separate corners" and we're like "okay, we'll still talk to each other." You missed that class, we all got put in separate corners, and we were just throwing notes to each other like talking he didn't care.

TC: Why do you think he doesn't care?

Amanda: I don't know.

Emma: I really don't know. Do you know?

Allison: I don't think any of us know.

Because of Mr. Carter's lack of consistency in reprimanding the girls they rarely believe Mr. Carter will follow through with his threats. What The Belles are stating as an inconsistency with Mr. Carter's authority is a point Lareau makes in her study regarding middle-class parents and their children. As Lareau (2003: 131) states, "when parents do not comply with rules but instruct their children to do so, the children openly point out the inconsistency." Similar to the children in Lareau's study, The Belles' ability to recognize Mr. Carter's lack of follow through regarding the re-assignment of seats also shows the lack of legitimacy he has with the girls as an authoritative figure.

The very next class exemplifies The Belles' point about Mr. Carter. When I walk into the classroom I notice the girls were still sitting next to each other.

Amanda leans over, as others are whispering in class, and says to Emma, "I'm trying to avoid him." She continues, "I got in trouble for blowing my nose...he thought I made you laugh." Emma says, "Sorry that we laughed." Amanda follows up by saying "it is not like we really get in trouble anyway." Allison adds, "yeah...we are still in the same seats." Emma follows by calling Mr. Carter "creeper."

Whether or not this shows a sense of entitlement on the part of the girls, it certainly shows the Belles' ability to exploit the situation. They know Mr. Carter will not move them, and even if he does, they do not care. They mock Mr. Carter by calling him a creeper, imitating his facial expressions and mimicking his mannerisms. Their perceptions of Mr. Carter are not one of an authoritative figure, but as the "weird" person who you make fun of and avoid.

Not even a week after the nose blowing incident and calling home for the missing mid-term Amanda again got mouthy in class. However, this time Mr. Carter's reaction was very much unexpected to what the girls normally encounter.

As the bell rings for lunch and most of the class is heading out for lunch Mr. Carter calls Amanda over to his desk. He tells Amanda they are going to call her parents. Amanda follows up with this by saying, "my parents...why I haven't done anything really." Mr. Carter continues, "you are staring off in space making noises...you almost fell out of your chair." Amanda says as she appears to be getting emotional, "you just strike me to strike me." Mr. Carter continues, "When I ask you to stop you should stop." Amanda says, "I am not the only one." Amanda continues, "This is unfair." Mr. Carter says, "I have to be equal with everyone, but everything is not fair for everyone." He continues, "If there is a five dollar bill on the ceiling and I say to Kieran and Jason they both have a chance to get the bill, guess what? Jason has an unfair advantage because he is about a foot taller." Mr. Carter continues to talk to her about talking out of turn in class, being disruptive, laughing for no reason. Amanda responds, "That is just my personality." Mr. Carter says, "yes... but if I say to stop you don't...you chew up all my attention." Amanda starts to walk out of the class when Mr. Carter says, "no we are calling your parents now." Amanda starts begging him to stop and not call. Amanda says as I am walking out, "Fine I'll just stop." Mr. Carter says, "It is too late. Which parent will be available?" (As the incident escalates I decide it was time for me to leave for lunch as well.)

When I returned to class after lunch I asked Mr. Carter, "Did you call her parents?" Mr. Carter says that he spoke with her dad. He says to me, "I think it's just the relationship

that we have...she thinks she can get away with anything.” What Mr. Carter said was what many other teachers had verbalized about other students in the school - they feel entitled. As Annette Lareau (2003: 125) states:

The act of interrupting a person of authority is a display of entitlement. It is also indicative of middle-class child-rearing priorities: the incivility of interrupting a speaker is overlooked in favor of encouraging children’s sense of their individual importance and of affirming their right to air their own thoughts and ideas to adults.

Like many students in Lareau’s study, The Belles exemplify a sense of control and entitlement within Mr. Carter’s classroom. It just so happens that in his classes I observed this type of behavior by the girls in the classroom rarely resulted in disciplinary actions. So when The Belles were confronted by someone in authority, it only appeared to make them fight harder.

Despite their behavior The Belles do not feel there should be consequences for their actions. When met with opposition they are shocked by the responses received from teachers, parents and others in authority. In the case of Mr. Carter calling home, the consequence for Amanda, by her dad, were lesser quality tickets to a Justin Bieber<sup>20</sup> concert.

Amanda came back to class and said to Allison “Can you believe he actually called. My dad was mad. And my dad told me I couldn’t go to Justin Bieber. How could he!” Allison says “Um...just watch the DVD when it comes out.” Amanda laughs, “No... I can’t go and sit in the front row. I begged him, but he said he’s selling those tickets. I will have to sit in the 10<sup>th</sup> row.” Emma snickers and says dramatically “The Horror!”

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<sup>20</sup> Justin Bieber is a popular young singer/songwriter relatively the same age as these girls.

What The Belles exhibited was a manipulation of power through a means of negotiations. Even with a call to her dad, Amanda still gets to go see Justin Bieber. The other girls mock the fact that the 10<sup>th</sup> row was Amanda's punishment; only exemplifying the voice of assumed privilege. They challenge authority yet feel they can say and do anything with little or no repercussions. And by still going to see Justin Bieber, it appears there assumptions may be legitimized.

For Amanda this incident was a catalyst regarding her behavior and interactions with The Belles and Mr. Carter throughout the remainder of the year. This created a greater discontent between her and Mr. Carter and increased her desire to turn her frustrations outward. The more reluctance Amanda exhibited, the more her behavior eventually began to affect the other girls.

On one of my last days in the classroom Emma walks toward me and says "we have new seats." As she walks away she turns and says, "Mr. Carter also called our parents and they all got emails from him about our behavior. Well everyone except Carly." I notice that across the room (next to Mr. Carter's desk) Amanda crosses her arms and slumps down into her chair. She yells to Emma, "Mr. Carter is a creeper."

Though it was apparent at the immediate time Mr. Carter finally stood his ground, I cannot say this affected The Belles' behavior in the long term. I noticed less time was spent reprimanding the girls, but I did not see this drastically affect their behavior. The girls sat in their new seats, but continued to pass of notes, whisper and talk loud/out of turn, though maybe with a little more finesse as they appeared to avoid the same level of confrontation that put them in this position.

The sense of entitlement from the girls was not something that I alone witnessed during my research. Teachers would continually share incidents with me, much like Amanda and Mr. Carter, which exemplified students' sense of entitlement in the classroom. Their stories brought light to the fact students believed they could negotiate their consequences, illustrating the assumptions of privilege and power in the classroom. Students' interactions, much like The Belles', were commonly seen as infractions within the space of the classroom. When these infractions were met with opposition students appeared to create new methods in which to challenge them. They constructed new ways to assume roles and claims of authority within the space. For example, even though The Belles got assigned new seats they still found ways to interact and behave as they wanted, despite the position they were placed in. Although Mr. Carter finally asserted his authority regarding The Belles' behavior, it appears that the values The Belles likely obtained from their middle-class upbringing still maintain control over the situation. As Laurea (2003: 241-242) states, "Middle-class children learn to develop and value an individualized sense of self... They learn to perform. They learn to present themselves." It appears that because of their sense of entitlement and assumptions of privilege, when they are met with confrontation in the classroom they will use any means necessary to get what they want when they want it with little or no concern for the consequences.

#### *BOUNDARIES EVERYWHERE*

For both groups of girls the distinctions between the academic and social aspects of school are quite clear. The girls verbalize, in various ways, that in order to be

successful one must do well in school. They also recognize that their friends are a vital part of the day-to-day survival within the classroom space. Their friends and friendships even appear more important than earning an education. This may be because the line between social behaviors interfering with academic success is very much blurred. However, it is the ability of these girls to play between the boundaries that make the classroom such an important learning space. A space, where they cultivate their abilities to move fluidly, though not always effectively, between the academic objective of school and the social facet which comes with the territory of being in an environment of peers.

Throughout my research there is a sense of these girls going up against the restrictions and boundaries that are in place; though for each group the boundaries and restrictions may have been different. What is unique for The Quinces and not offered to The Belles is a classroom environment that encourages students to be social. It actually requires it. On the other hand, The Belles are a group of girls that from my observations are social no matter the perimeters. They not only socialize throughout class, they do it in such a way that challenges the normative behaviors expected of them. The Belles' overt "socialness" seems to exemplify the assumptions of privilege they hold; which for girls like The Quinces, a lack of privilege only furthers their frustrations about being minorities at VHS. For all the girls, the classroom becomes a space where they learn to interact with teachers and peers in a variety of situations, while figuring out how to play with the social and academic boundaries that are constantly in fluctuation around them.

## 7: CONCLUSION

Schools are sites where the demands between the academic expectations of success are very much in competition with the social expectations of students. Some students choose to place their focus on academics and others decide that socializing is more important. Boy or girl, these demands are present on a daily basis and everyone must deal with how to handle them.

My research focused on girls in the classroom and the role gender had in structuring their interpretations in school. What I discovered was that gender in the classroom was very much a self-restricting facet of the space. No matter the issues, The Belles and The Quinces were absorbed with their bodies in such a way that exemplifies an understanding of how narrow notions of femininity are still at work. When I asked them to tell me what it means to be a girl they were quick to associate “girl” with clothing, make-up, hair and body image; all aspects of “being a girl” that are presented at surface level. What is interesting here is that each group had a very different perspective on what being a girl means for them and I believe a large part of that has to do with the insider/outsider mentality.

The Quinces were focused on the tangible aspects of girlhood such as clothing and make-up. Trivial or not, clothing and make-up have powerful meanings for these

girls. To them, these tangible aspects of girlhood are a means to begin associating themselves with becoming women. Whether it is feeling more womanly or being able to express themselves, clothing and make-up, and their ability to use and choose their appearance plays a role in what being a girl means to them.

On the other hand, The Belles were less occupied with the tangible and more focused on the physical image of the body. The Belles see the perfect girl and the ideal body type and choose to idealize it, but to them it is unattainable. Their discussions were bound by their physical image and work involved in “being a girl.” They appeared more susceptible to who they were not then who they were. Where The Belles felt restricted by hair, clothing and make-up The Quinces would celebrate its meaning of womanhood. Whether or not any of The Belles were confident in their bodies is likely overshadowed by the internal constraints of self evaluation they placed on themselves to be the ideal/perfect girl or to at least live up to those standards. The discussions I had with The Belles were riddled with confusion and laden with contradictions about what being a girl means to them. They appear much more susceptible to the media images of popular culture; coloring their perspective on the expectations and assumptions put in place for them.

Though The Belles and The Quinces come from two very different backgrounds, I think it is worth noting that they show some distinct behaviors and attitudes about being a girl. And in both instances they are very much pre-occupied with them. I believe how both groups of girls define who they are may fall within the narrow notions in



understanding themselves as “girls”; however they choose to define themselves on their own terms- narrow or not. They control (or try to) the image that is placed out for others to see and claim it as their own.

What is most interesting is despite the narrow notions of femininity that are in place regarding the girls’ opinions toward themselves, something very different is at work in the space of the classroom. This is where I believe the notion of gender paradox comes into play. Gender paradox, as a reminder, is the idea that girls are outperforming boys socially and academically in the classroom, but schools are sites where narrow feminine notions are still at work. The paradox in play is a result of these girls claiming space within the classroom as their own, while defining themselves in narrow feminine terms as girls. One might expect that based on their perceptions of themselves in terms of make-up, hair, clothing and body image that they would not challenge the social and academic boundaries within the classroom. However, that is exactly what they did and will likely continued to do.

The Belles challenged their role within the classroom in a somewhat typical manner. Some would call it rebellion, while others might see their behavior as asserting a sense of entitlement and privilege in order to claim the classroom as their own space. As middle-class students, The Belles see themselves as shaping the setting of the classroom instead of being its subject. This takes place through their ability to negotiate and challenge the authority of their teachers; which in turn blurs the academic and social boundaries within the classroom. The lines blur when their academic success is not what

draws their teacher's attention; rather, it is their ability to overshadow the academic with their outright, outspoken and manipulative behavior. Throughout my observations as The Belles increasingly became more comfortable with Mr. Carter, they were more willing to challenge the rules set in place. However, even after Mr. Carter began to take a more authoritative role with The Belles, they still continued to assert their power and sense of freedom into any situation by standing up and standing loud.

On the contrary, The Quinces saw the classroom as a contested space where they felt like outsiders as a result of external constraints of class and racialization, but also a space to develop friendships. Though The Quinces saw school as a site where friends are made (though I think most were Hispanic) they also felt misunderstood and negatively characterized by teachers and peers based on their Hispanic culture. Instead of assuming privilege within the space, they experienced a sense of frustration. Yes, the girls wanted to go to college, but the reality may be quite different because of their outsider lower/working-class status. Expectations of success were also many times unrealistic as they were taking classes not typically associated with college track students and their expectations of teachers to guide them in class only exemplified their outsider status within school. For The Quinces the classroom experience was a contentious one as a result of race, economic status and a general misunderstanding of the insider/outsider reality of the school environment.

The concept of gender paradox has quite a pronounced undertone in my research and exemplifies *The New Girl* (as I mentioned earlier) or Future Girl as described by

Anita Harris (2004). *The Belles and The Quinces* play with the lines of femininity artfully. As girls, they see themselves physically with a typified lens. Make-up, clothing, hair, and body image issues are all aspects that stereotypically define girls as girls. However, their command of the classroom space is a contentious one because of their inhibition to be outspoken and/or social. For *The Belles and The Quinces* this experience within school describes a “new girlhood” where greater expectations for success are held by teachers, peers and the girls themselves. Regardless of the constraints, internal or external, placed on them or by them, the girls handle the narrow feminine notions by rising up and dealing with the social and academic pressures placed on them. Though each group of girls views the space of the classroom from an extremely different perspective they do so in a manner that is not typically seen as feminine.

What my research brought to light is that there is no standard cookie-cutter example of how gender works within the classroom. I examined two groups of girls who came from two very distinct backgrounds; however, I came across hundreds of students who likely would have shown me similar examples of gender paradox as it individually related to each student. Examples where narrow gendered notions (feminine or masculine) are in conflict with the behaviors girls (and boys for that matter) portray within the classroom that clash with expected norms.

I believe what I observed within the classroom was typical to the environment I was in- a diverse affluent high school in Northern Virginia- and could not be generalized to high schools as a whole. However, I do believe the gender paradox that presented itself

in my research is certainly not confined to VHS. Girls at this age are all exploring who they are physically, but also learning to develop their social aptitude within a public space. Some girls may reflect students like Tonya who are quiet and soft spoken (who some may assume is what a typical girl should be like), while others may reflect Cammi or Amanda who wear their opinions on their sleeve for everyone to see.

Ultimately, when exploring schools as a site where gender is at play it is important to note that there are always multiple perspectives. I could have easily focused on the “Tonya’s” within VHS, but it was The Belles and The Quinces who drew my attention much like they draw the attention of others around them. And because of this, the concept of gender paradox was presented to me upfront and outright, much like Amanda presented herself to others.

## APPENDIX A

### Interview Protocol: Focus Group

1. Do you know each other?
  - If yes, do you take the same classes? Activities?
2. Are you friends with other girls in your classes?
  - If no, why? If yes, why?
  - How long have you been friends?
  - What do you consider qualities you like in a “girl” friend?
3. What do you think about school?
4. What do you think about your classes?
  - Do they challenge you? If yes, how so? If no, why?
  - Do you think they are too easy? For yes or no, why?
5. What are your favorite/ less favorite classes? Why?
6. Why do you take \_\_\_\_\_ class?
7. What do you like most about school?
8. How are you treated in the classroom by your teachers?
  - Do they encourage/ignore you? How so?
  - How does that make you feel?
  - Are there particular teachers you like? Why?
  - Are there particular teachers you do not like? Why?
9. Do you participate in class?
  - If yes, what do you do? If no, why not?
10. For those of you with classes together, how do you communicate during class?
  - What do you \_\_\_\_\_ (talk, pass notes, whisper- however they communicate) about?
  - How do you think your teachers feel about you \_\_\_\_\_ing in class?
11. Who does/ does not participate in class? What do you think about this?
12. How do you feel fellow students treat you (individually or as a group) in the classroom?
13. What do you think about boys in the classroom?

- How do they act?
  - What do you think about their behavior?
14. How are boys treated in class by teachers?
- What do you think of how they are treated?
15. What do you think about other girls in your classes?
16. How do girls act in class?
- What do you think about their behavior?
17. Are you involved with school activities: clubs, sports, etc.?
- If no, why? If yes, why are you involved?
  - Who else is involved in \_\_\_\_\_?
18. What do you do for fun after or outside of school?
- Why do you do \_\_\_\_\_?
  - Are your friends, girls or boys, involved?
19. What does the word “gender” mean to you?
20. What does being female mean to you?

### Interview Protocol: One-on-One

1. What do you think about school?
2. What do you think about your classes?
  - Do they challenge you? If yes, how so? If no, why?
  - Do you think they are too easy? For yes or no, why?
3. What are your favorite/ less favorite classes? Why?
4. Why do you take \_\_\_\_\_ class?
5. What do you like most about school?
6. How are you treated in the classroom by your teachers?
  - Do they encourage/ignore you? How so?
  - How does that make you feel?
  - Is there are particular teacher you like/do not like? Why?
7. Do you participate in class?
  - If yes, what do you do? If no, why not?
8. Who does/ does not participate in class? What do you think about this?
9. How do you feel fellow students treat you in the classroom?
10. What do you think about boys in the classroom?
  - How do they act?
  - What do you think about their behavior?
11. How are boys treated in class by teachers?
  - What do you think of how they are treated?
12. What do you think about the girls in your classes?
13. How do girls act in class?
  - What do you think about their behavior?
14. Are you friends with girls in your classes?
  - If no, why? If yes, why?
  - How long have you been friends?
  - What do you consider qualities you like in a “girl” friend?
15. Are you involved with school activities: clubs, sports, etc.?
  - If no, why?
  - If yes, why are you involved?
  - Who else is involved in \_\_\_\_\_?
16. What do you do for fun after school?
  - Why do you do \_\_\_\_\_?
  - Are your friends, girls or boys, in involved?
17. What does the word “gender” mean to you?
18. What does being female mean to you?

## APPENDIX B

### PARENTAL CONSENT FORM: FOCUS GROUP

#### RESEARCH PROCEDURES

This research is being conducted to understand the role of gender in the classroom and amongst students and the role it plays in educational aspirations and attainment of students. If your child agrees to participate, your child will be asked to partake in a focus group interview with 3 to 5 other girls. The focus group interview may last between 30 minutes to 1 hour. The focus group interview will take place after school and/or at a time convenient for the group of girls. Together the girls will be asked questions about their school and classroom experience, peer relationships, and what it means to them to be a girl in school today.

#### RISKS

The only foreseeable risk or discomfort in participating in this interview includes sharing personal and emotional information. Such information may cause mild to moderate uneasiness, but is not projected to cause long-term psychological, social, or physical effects.

#### BENEFITS

There are no benefits to your child as a participant other than to further research in understanding the role of gender in the classroom.

#### CONFIDENTIALITY

The data in this study will be confidential. *However, it is important to remember other participants will be present during the focus group interview.* All research conducted in school settings, the name of the institution, students, staff and faculty will be changed using pseudonyms, and all potential identifiers will be omitted to protect your confidentiality. The only means to identify participants will be held by the researcher in a secure location.

#### PARTICIPATION

Your child's participation is voluntary, and your child may withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason. If your child decides not to participate or withdraw from the study, there is no penalty or loss of benefits to which your child is otherwise entitled. There are no costs to your child or any other party.



**CONTACT**

This research is being conducted by Therese Cooper, Department of Sociology at George Mason University. She may be reached via email at [tcooper1@gmu.edu](mailto:tcooper1@gmu.edu) or cell phone at 757-876-0094 for questions or to report a research-related problem. You may also contact her thesis advisor Dr. Amy Best at [abest@gmu.edu](mailto:abest@gmu.edu) or by office phone at 703-993-1426 if you have questions. You may contact the George Mason University Office of Research Subject Protections at 703-993-4121 if you have questions or comments regarding your rights as a participant in the research. This research has been reviewed according to George Mason University procedures governing your participation in this research.

**CONSENT**

I have read this form and agree to allow my child to participate in this study.

- ☐ I agree to allow my child to be interviewed with audio taping
- ☐ I agree to allow my child to be interviewed without audio taping

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Print Name

---

Relation to Participant

---

Signature

---

Date of Signature

## **ASSENT FORM: FOCUS GROUP**

### **RESEARCH PROCEDURES**

The reason for this research is to find out what it's like to be a girl in school today. If you agree to take part in this study, you will be asked to spend about 30 minutes to 1 hour with me in a focus group interview which will have 2 to 4 other girls who will also be part of the interview. You will be asked questions about peers, classroom activities, teachers, and personal experiences in school.

### **RISKS AND BENEFITS**

Nothing bad will happen to you if you take part in this study. However, some people may feel a little bit nervous talking about personal things such as peers, teachers or what goes on in school during the day with other girls around. There are no rewards or money paid for being in this study. There are no benefits to you other than to help continue research in understanding what it means to be a girl in school today.

### **CONFIDENTIALITY**

Your name will not be identified in this research. I will change all names of individuals and the school in order to protect you in my study. I will be taping the focus group, but will keep the recording in a safe place. I will be the only one who will have access to the interview. I may use some of your words in my final report, but will never tell anyone your name. *It is important to remember other girls will be present during the focus group interview.*

### **PARTICIPATION**

You do not have to talk to me if you do not want to. If you change your mind after we start talking and want to stop that is OK. I will not get mad and nothing will happen to you.

### **CONTACT**

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**CONSENT**

I have read this form and agree to take part in the focus group. Please check the following if you agree to talk with me.

- ☐ I agree to talk with audio taping
- ☐ I agree to talk, but without audio taping

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Print Name Here

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Date of Signature

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Sign Name Here

## **PARENTAL CONSENT FORM: ONE-ON-ONE INTERVIEW**

### **RESEARCH PROCEDURES**

This research is being conducted to understand the role of gender in the classroom and the role it plays in educational aspirations and attainment of students. If your child agrees to participate, your child will be asked to partake in a one-on-one interview that may last between 30 minutes to 1 hour. The interview will take place after school and/or at a time convenient for your child. Interview questions will address your child's perception of their school and classroom experience, peer relationships, and what it means to them to be a girl in school today.

### **RISKS**

The only foreseeable risk or discomfort in participating in this interview includes sharing personal and emotional information. Such information may cause mild to moderate uneasiness, but is not projected to cause long-term psychological, social, or physical effects.

### **BENEFITS**

There are no benefits to your child as a participant other than to further research in understanding the role of gender in the classroom.

### **CONFIDENTIALITY**

The data in this study will be confidential. All research conducted in school settings, the name of the institution, students, staff and faculty will be changed using pseudonyms, and all potential identifiers will be omitted to protect your confidentiality. The only means to identify participants will be held by the researcher in a secure location.

### **PARTICIPATION**

Your child's participation is voluntary, and your child may withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason. If your child decides not to participate or withdraw from the study, there is no penalty or loss of benefits to which your child is otherwise entitled. There are no costs to your child or any other party.

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**CONSENT**

I have read this form and agree to allow my child to participate in this study.

- ☐ I agree to allow my child to be interviewed with audio taping  
☐ I agree to allow my child to be interviewed without audio taping

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Print Name

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Relation to Participant

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Signature

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Date of Signature

## **ASSENT FORM: ONE-ON-ONE INTERVIEW**

### **RESEARCH PROCEDURES**

The reason for this research is to find out what it's like to be a girl in school today. If you agree to take part in this study, you will be asked to spend about 30 minutes to 1 hour with me in a one-on-one interview. You will be asked questions about peers, classroom activities, teachers, and personal experiences in school.

### **RISKS AND BENEFITS**

Nothing bad will happen to you if you take part in this study. However, some people may feel a little bit nervous talking about personal things such as peers, teachers or what goes on in school during the day. There are no rewards or money paid for being in this study. There are no benefits to you other than to help continue research in understanding what it means to be a girl in school today.

### **CONFIDENTIALITY**

Your name will not be identified in this research. I will change all names of individuals and the school in order to protect you in my study. I will be taping our interview together, but will keep the recording in a safe place. I will be the only one who will have access to the interviews. I may use some of your words in my final report, but will never tell anyone your name.

### **PARTICIPATION**

You do not have to talk to me if you do not want to. If you change your mind after we start talking and want to stop that is OK. I will not get mad and nothing will happen to you.

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**CONSENT**

I have read this form and agree to take part in this study. Please check the following if you agree to talk with me.

- ☐ I agree to talk with audio taping
- ☐ I agree to talk, but without audio taping

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Print Name Here

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Date of Signature

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Sign Name Here

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## CURRICULUM VITAE

Therese Cooper grew up in Hampton, VA where she graduated from Kecoughtan High School in 2002. She attended George Mason University, where she received her Bachelor of Arts in Sociology in 2006. She has worked as a Graduate Research Assistant for the University and for the Drug Enforcement Administration's Museum & Visitor Center as a Research Assistant during her graduate studies. She went on to receive her Master of Arts in Sociology from George Mason University in 2011. She continues to work for the Drug Enforcement Administration.