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Middle School Girls in Postfeminist Times

by

Susan McCullough

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Urban Education in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2015

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Urban Education in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Professor Ofelia Garcia

April 2, 2015
Date

Chair of Examining Committee

Anthony Picciano

April 2, 2015
Date

Executive Officer

Professor Wendy Luttrell

Professor Terrie Epstein
Supervisory Committee

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

Abstract

Middle School Girls in Postfeminist Times

by

Susan McCullough

Advisor: Dr. Ofelia Garcia

This dissertation, based on an ethnographic case study conducted in the 2013-14 school year, examines early adolescent girls and their teachers and the way in which they experience gender and gender relations in the public middle school context in New York City. Current research into schools in the United States tends to focus on the experience of those students who are in crisis. For the most part, girls are not considered to be a demographic in crisis in public schools in the United States today. Because research on gender and schooling that highlights the success of girls is based on their scores on standardized tests and their high school graduation and college matriculation rates, research into the actual experiences of girls in school is lacking, and necessary. This dissertation discusses, through data gathered in interviews and focus groups, how girls think, feel and act in reaction to their experiences in school.

Specifically this dissertation examines the experience of girls in middle school in the context of postfeminism. Postfeminist ideology emphasizes the notion that, because of anti-discriminatory legislation and the dominant narrative of competition, individuality and meritocracy in schools, feminism and advocacy for girls and women is no longer needed. Findings reveal the ways in which girls make meaning of gender relations in their school environment and the postfeminist practices they employ in order to exert control over their school experiences. Findings also

suggest the ways in which teachers, administrators and school policies are complicit in the development of these practices.

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In August of 2013 just before I started my fieldwork my advisor Dr. Jean Anyon passed away. Jean had been with me through my long struggle to define the focus of my research. At that time I could not image how my work could continue without her. But, it did and as the months of fieldwork passed I tried to keep in Jean's ideas in mind, tried to imagine what she would make of the data. Throughout the research and writing process I have wondered how this work would be different if I had her guidance. Here at the end of the process I can only hope that my research honors her scholarship and her work as a teacher. I hope she would be proud. Dr. Ofelia Garcia graciously accepted me as her student after Jean died. I am so grateful to her for her warm guidance and critical review of the work. Thanks to Dr. Wendy Luttrell for always furthering my thinking with her thoughtful and incisive questions. Thanks to Dr. Pamela Stone for kind support and enthusiasm. Thanks also to Dr. Terrie Epstein for stepping in at the last moment so generously.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction

Usually I ate lunch in the cafeteria. But, some days you don't relish eating your lunch while standing in the corner of a loud, stuffy and smelly lunchroom full of middle school students. On one of those days when the sounds and smells of the cafeteria seemed unbearable, I decided instead to eat in the main office. Middle schools are extremely loud and chaotic places most of the time. Lunchtime, when the students are either outside or downstairs in the lunchroom (or possibly hiding in the stairwells) and the teachers are shut up in their rooms eating and gossiping about the students, is a very quiet time in the hallways and especially in the main office. On this day it was just me, eating lentils from a thermos, at a table in the office and Suzanne, the school secretary, at her desk working while top 40 radio played softly in the background. Suzanne occasionally sang along. I was scrolling through emails on my computer when a family came in – a slightly older looking Latino couple and their eighth grade daughter whom I recognized from the science class I observed once a week. The father approached me and asked if I minded if they sat with me at the table so he could talk to his daughter. I said I didn't mind and not wanting to be in the way or inhibit their family conversation, I started to gather my things to leave. The father told me to stay as what he had to say to his daughter was “minimal.” While the mother sat silently with a sullen expression on her face, the father began to question his daughter, Carly, asking “what's going on?” and why she was behind in everything. He waved a paper in Carly's face and said that he had just spoken to Sofia, the principal, who told him that she is close to failing. Carly looked over at the paper and said “that doesn't mean you're failing” and then started to cry. Her father, his voice getting louder with each exchange said “don't you start crying on me now.” He continued to question her: “when you go to class do you do your

work? Do you open your books?" Carly didn't respond. Finally, exasperated the father turned to Suzanne and asked "is the guidance counselor here?" Suzanne picked up the phone to check and I decided to leave. (Field notes, 12/5/13)

As I walked down to the hall to see if the library had re-opened yet I thought of my field notes from earlier that morning taken in Carly's eighth grade science class. This is what I had written about her experience in class that morning with Clay:

Clay is a small, scrawny, unappealing boy with closely cropped dark hair who mostly dresses in long t-shirts and over-sized sweat pants. He walks in a slightly hunched over way, possibly because his backpack is too big or heavy and usually wears a mischievous expression that communicates "I'm up to no good." In science class he is always harassing Carly. He's shouting across the aisle "don't you want me to hug you" and "look at me" and then slightly more threateningly "if you don't look at me..." She is looking the other way and has her hands up by her face as if she's trying to protect herself. She's definitely annoyed, but not freaked out. This goes on the entire period as the kids are supposed to working in groups on a lab.

Carly gets up to throw something away and Donald (another boy in the class) stands up to block her way and hug her. She has to shove him aside coming and going to get him to leave her alone. There is no question Carly was harassed by Clay and Malik (another boy at her table) during the entire lab.

(Field notes, 12/5/13)

There was absolutely no way Carly could concentrate or do her work all period long. And yet, she never complained about the boys to the teacher or asked for help. Is this a scene a 14 -year old girl can describe to her father? How can she explain the intense harassment and her inability to control the situation either on her own or with the help of one of the three adults (two co-teachers and a paraprofessional) in the room? I thought of her father's simple questions "when you go to class do you do your work? Do you open your books?" and how much more complicated Carly's experience in school was each day.

Defining the problem

This dissertation examines the experiences of early adolescent girls and their teachers in terms of gender and gender relations in an urban, public middle school. My starting point for this dissertation research was not middle school girls. Rather, my starting point was a series of current events in 2012, at the inception of my research project, including an ongoing discussion in United States politics about "the war on women" (McAuliff, 2012; Torregrosa, 2012; Bassett, 2012; Rich, 2012). The "war" is over several women's issues including access to contraception, primarily through an ongoing effort to defund Planned Parenthood and the attempted passage of the Blunt Amendment. This amendment would have allowed employers with moral objection to veto health care coverage provisions that covered contraception for women (for which the now infamous all-male, Republican-led House committee was convened to debate). Also at issue are abortion rights which are threatened by attempts to defund Planned Parenthood and the introduction of "personhood" laws in many states (advocating that life begins at conception and that fetuses are entitled to rights). The Senate debated, instead of automatically approving as in the past, the re-authorization of the Violence Against Women Act. In that year not only were

rights that are obviously of concern to women such as contraception and abortion threatened but so were the rights of public employees to collective bargaining. Republican governors in Wisconsin, Indiana, Ohio, Tennessee and other states have debated and attempted to pass legislation challenging the rights of union employees to collective bargaining (Anderson, 2011). These include the rights of public school teacher unions including tenure and seniority-based job protection. This has been done through “right to work” legislation and the acceleration of privatization of public education through charter schools. These too are women’s issues because a high number of public sector union employees are women (U.S. Department of Labor, 2011) and a very high number of public school teachers, upwards of 70%, are women (Editors of Rethinking Schools, 2012; Linthicum, 2012). It is also notable that these issues are re-emerging (from the 1990s mostly) at a time when neoliberal reform is rampant in almost every aspect of the economy and therefore having an intense impact on the social welfare of most Americans through cuts to and the privatization of many social programs, and in particular of public services like education.

More recently issues of domestic violence, rape and the safety of women on college campuses have captured the attention of the media through high profile actions of professional athletes (Gay, 2014), student artist Emma Sulkowicz at Columbia University who inspired the “Carry the Weight” movement, and campus based investigative reporting including the controversial *Rolling Stone* magazine article about fraternities at the University of Virginia (Erdely, 2014). A developing awareness of sexual assault and violence against women has also inspired the creation of a new organization, “It’s on Us”, which boasts endorsement, through videos, of many celebrities and on whose behalf President Obama spoke at the Grammy awards. A television

advertisement about domestic violence awareness was aired during the Superbowl in February 2015. Similarly, high profile celebrities are publicly declaring whether or not they are feminists. At the Academy Awards ceremony in 2015 the winner of the best actress award, Patricia Arquette, used her acceptance speech to make a plea for equal pay. There is a tension then between what is happening politically in the United States around women's issue and what is happening in the media. For me, the fractured state of affairs on women's issues is frustrating and I wondered how these disparate messages might be impacting young girls. In terms of education I wondered how these conflicting messages might be playing out in the classroom and impacting girls' experiences in school.

Gender based educational research and educational policy

Defining the problem within the framework of current educational research can be difficult because discussions about gender in Kindergarten through 12th grade education are largely absent. In this section I will examine the role that gender does play in current educational research, largely based on the assumptions that girls vastly outperform boys, and review recent educational policy addressing gender based issues. Any person who observed Carly's experience in school could recognize that there is a problem with the way boys and girls are treating each other and the impact of such treatment on the girls. However, qualitative research into girls' experiences has not been a priority. In the United States recent educational research and educational policy primarily focuses on the racial achievement gap (Galman & Mallozzi, 2012) and not the gender achievement gap as in some countries like the United Kingdom and certainly not on gender-based experiences of female students. In the United States it is widely accepted that female students outperform male students, with possible exceptions in math or

science. Likewise, as female students outnumber male students in college enrollment and graduation rates, the idea of examining the gender achievement gap or gender differences in education appears outdated (Buchmann & DiPrete, 2006). In a policy climate that prioritizes quantitative over qualitative research, girls' experiences in the school environment become invisible. Existing research on gender and students is closely tied to studies on achievement rates and conditions for academic achievement that pit boys and girls against each other based on essentialized notions about their optimal conditions for academic success.

In 1992 the American Association of University Women (AAUW) commissioned and published *How Schools Shortchange Girls: A Study of the Major Findings on Girls and Education*. This report looked at “accomplishments, behaviors, and needs of girls” to determine its findings and recommendations (AAUW, 1992, p. 3). Notably the scope of the report included more than just the results of standardized tests and aimed to comment on the experience of girls in school. The report also assessed changes that had been made since the 1970s to the “formal curriculum,” that is, curricular materials being used in schools. The research found that though sexism had decreased examples of “omission, tokenism, and gender stereotyping” were frequently found in textbooks (AAUW, 1992, p. 60). Researchers made a point to look beyond the formal curriculum to the “classroom as curriculum,” which examined how girls are treated in classroom interactions both with teachers and other students and the “evaded curriculum,” which included “the functioning of bodies, the expression and valuing of feelings, and the dynamics of power” (AAUW, 1992, p. 75). The report raised awareness of continued gender inequity in the classroom despite gains made in the 1970s. A spate of similar research and journalism followed including *Failing at Fairness: How Our Schools Cheat Girls* (1994) by researchers Myra Sadker

and David Sadker and *Schoolgirls: Young Women, Self Esteem and the Confidence Gap* (1995) by journalist Peggy Orenstein. The report also generated a debate about which gender was actually being the most shortchanged by America's public schools.

At least one critic of the AAUW report argued that "the idea that 'schools shortchange girls' is wrong and dangerously wrong" and that more research is needed on boys in school (Kleinfeld, quoted in Halpern and LaMay, 2000, p. 242). This criticism is based on the fact that boys, in particular boys of color, were doing significantly worse than their white counterparts on achievement tests, were overrepresented in special education and had extremely low rates of graduation. Kleinfeld's research on the status of boys in education was used by postfeminist author Christina Hoff Sommers in her 2002 book, *The War Against Boys: How Misguided Feminism is Harming Our Young Men*. Sommers also drew on research indicating that women were attending and graduating college at higher rates than men (Koerner, 1999; Lewin, 1998). Thus begun the backlash against researching girls' experiences in school. The "boy crisis" in education has been a priority in educational research and popular literature (Pollack & Pipher, 1999; Kindlon & Thompson, 2000; Tyre, 2009) for the last 20 years.

I would argue that to suggest that research on girls in school is unnecessary because they are achieving at higher levels than boys is misguided and part of a postfeminist mindset that assumes gender equity exists based on existing legislative protections around gender discrimination.

There is a crisis for boys of color in public education in the United States, but it must be acknowledged that the school crisis is connected to much larger issues of racism and poverty.

These are socio-economic issues of an enormous scale in American society that will not be

solved by focusing on standardized test scores or rates of high school and college graduation. Likewise, to assume a dichotomous argument in which research must either focus on boys or girls or to assume male achievement as the point of reference when examining the performance of girls in schools seems only to underscore the existing gender bias in public education in the United States. It is also clear that the notion of classroom experience as an integral part of the curriculum and particularly the “evaded curriculum” — that is, what is not being discussed — are not being addressed by current educational research or educational policy (AAUW, 1992).

How significant are the differences in the performance levels of boys and girls?

Because the notion of girls outperforming boys is assumed in popular culture (Kohn, 2009; Tobin, n.d.; Kristof, 2010), in this section I will briefly look at the current achievement level of boys and girls and consider the extent to which girls are outperforming boys. My research reveals that while girls outperform boys on most standardized tests, the difference is typically less than 10 points. Likewise, with rates of college graduation a gender gap exists reflecting a four or five percentage point advantage for women. The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) published a report in 2004 entitled *Trends in Educational Equity of Girls and Women*. This is the most recent report from the NCES to focus on gender at the secondary school level. The report examines how girls are doing in school as compared to boys on a number of different issues including academic performance, extra-curricular activities and post-secondary education. Using data from the National Assessment of Educational Program (NAEP), the report states “Females have consistently outperformed males in reading and writing” (Freeman, 2004, p. 4). A closer look at the statistics reveals that there has been no

measurable increase in the 2004 scores of females on the reading test from the 1992 scores. And in fact, there is a very slight decrease in the 12th grade reading scores from 1992 to 2004.

In 2003 the difference between boys' and girls' scores on the 4th grade reading test was 7 points with girls doing better than boys. In eighth grade it increases to 11 points and in 12th grade we see the largest difference, 16 points (Freeman, 2004) with girls doing better than boys.

Interestingly this discrepancy in 12th grade reading scores does not translate into higher scores for females on the Advanced Placement (AP) examinations in English, also typically given in 12th grade. Though more female students take the AP English exam, on average their scores are slightly lower than that of male students taking the exam (Freeman, 2004). A more recent report, *The Nation's Report Card*, which uses NAEP statistics to report on trends in academic progress, finds that the gap in reading scores between 13-year old males and females is 8 points (NCES, 2012) with girls doing better than boys. This is unchanged from the 2008 gap (NCES, 2012).

Trends in Educational Equity of Girls and Women notes that in terms of math, though there is a "common perception that males consistently outperform females in mathematics", the NAEP math scores do not support that perception (Freeman, 2004, p. 6). Rather, the gap between boys and girls average scale scores is "quite small" and perhaps more importantly for my purposes here has "fluctuated only slightly" between 1990 and 2003 (Freeman, 2004, p. 6). According to *The Nation's Report Card*, in math 13-year old males have outperformed females since 1973, but the gap in 2012 was only 2 points, a reduction from the 5 point gap in 2008 (NCES, 2012).

Science scores show more mixed results. On fourth and eighth grade science assessments males scored higher than females in 2000, but did not score higher four years earlier in 1996. On 12th grade science assessments, males did better than females in 1996, but there was no “measurable difference” in 2000 (Freeman, 2004, p.6). The difference between male and female scores increased between 1996 and 2000 on the fourth and eighth grade assessments, but again there was no “measurable difference” in the gap at the 12th grade level (Freeman, 2004, p. 6-7).

Women are going to college at higher rates than men – about 14 percentage points higher for all Title IV institutions (NCES, 2012). For all students who entered college seeking a bachelor’s degree or equivalent from a 4-year institution and were first time and full time students, NCES reported in 2012 that the overall graduation rate is 58.3% within six years. At public institutions the overall rate of graduation for all students is 56%. At these institutions men are graduating at a rate of 53% and women at a rate of 58.5%. This reflects a difference of five percentage points. At private, nonprofit institutions the overall rate is 65.4% with men graduating at a rate of 63% and women at a rate of 67.3%. This reflects a difference of four percentage points. And at private for-profit colleges, the overall rate is 28.4%, with men graduating at a rate of 30.2% and women at 26.8%. (Knapp, L.G., Kelly-Reid, J.E. & Grinder, S.A., 2012). These statistics do not indicate an overwhelming advantage for women and girls either in test scores or college graduation rates. I would argue that while the statistics do not reveal dramatic discrepancies in academic achievement between boys and girls, the assumption of higher female achievement, particularly in popular culture, continues.

Current research around gender in education tends to place boys and girls in competition using essentialized arguments about gender – girls are naturally more organized, eager to please and have an easier time paying attention than boys - to explain why one group does better than another. These arguments also draw on the perennial debate about the “feminization” of education (Griffiths, 2006; Johnson, 2008; Drudy, 2008). Feminization in education is allegedly the result of the over-representation of women in teaching (particularly in elementary education), and is in part what supposedly makes school compatible to girls and challenging to boys. While it is interesting to examine the actual statistics in comparison to the assumptions made about girls’ performance as compared to boys, I would argue that it is not as useful as a qualitative examination into the lived experiences of girls in school.

Gender based education policy

Also integral to defining the problem is the historical context for gender based educational policy at federal, state and city levels. The literature reveals that very little policy related to gender has been made in the United States since Title IX was passed in 1972. That is, discussion of gender, beyond anti-harassment, anti-discrimination language, has always been absent from educational policy. My initial intention was to only examine educational policy of the last 20 years, however, in order to find policy that was explicitly related to gender I had to go back 40 years. Increasing the number of girls who pursue math and science at high levels has been cited as a priority since the 1990s, but specific programming and funding at the federal level has not been made available to do so. It is also interesting to note that policy language is more frequently focused on procedures for dealing with discrimination and harassment as opposed to educational programs or curriculum about gender equity for students, teachers or administrators. What does

this reveal about where our society believes bias comes from and whose responsibility is it to address issues of equity?

The hallmark policy of gender and education is Title IX, passed into law in 1972. This statute was intended to end gender discrimination in education by requiring all educational programs that receive federal funding to comply with anti-discrimination, anti-harassment policies. Most recognizable in its support of girls and women in school sports, Title IX also addresses sexual harassment and violence in schools and the rights of pregnant and parenting teens in schools. Likewise, Title IX was intended to benefit both boys and girls by ensuring equality in terms of funding and access to educational programs.

In terms of federal education policy I reviewed *Goals 2000*, created in the 1990s to set goals for standards-based reform and often considered the precursor to *No Child Left Behind*, initially approved in 2001, and *Race to the Top*, created in 2009. It is important to note that, while the federal government provides guidelines, most education policy is determined at the state level and varies from state to state. *Goals 2000* notes that “every school should work to eliminate sexual harassment” and states that by the year 2000 the number of students “especially women and minorities” who receive degrees in science, math and engineering will “increase significantly” (“Goals 2000: Educate American Act”, 1994, unpaginated).

In 2004, the U.S. Department of Education created new regulations related to single sex education stemming from a provision in *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB). When introducing these guidelines, former U.S. Secretary of Education Roderick Paige noted in a press release that these

provisions allowed for “maximum flexibility” and though the research is “incomplete in this area” single sex educational programs have been shown to “produce positive results for some students in some settings” (U.S. Department of Education, 2004, unpaginated). One study (not cited) found that “single sex education particularly helps children from underprivileged backgrounds” (U.S. Department of Education, 2004, unpaginated). The provisions require schools to provide a rationale for single sex classes, provide co-educational versions of the same classes that are accessible and to review the necessity of single sex classes every two years. Interestingly, public charter schools are exempt from these three requirements should they choose to implement single sex classes (National Association for Single Sex Education, n.d.).

Finally, *Race to the Top* (RTT) only notes in its section on math and science that applicants for the RTT funds can receive points by “addressing the needs of underrepresented groups and of women and girls in the areas of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics” (American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, 2009, unpaginated). It appears that these more recent federal educational policies assume that Title IX addresses issues of discrimination and no further explicit policies are needed. It is interesting to note that there are no provisions for teacher training or classroom intervention around ideas of gender equity. Again, this seems to imply that no work is needed in this area and that issues of equity have been resolved.

At the state level, I examined educational policy in New York State, and found the *Dignity for All Students Act* (DASA) which was signed into law in 2010 and took effect in 2012. Under this act a New York State Education law regarding instruction in “civility, citizenship and character education” was expanded to include tolerance and respect for a number of other identifiers

including gender identity (NYSED, n.d., unpaginated). This law also requires schools to collect and report data on discrimination and harassment (NYSED, n.d., unpaginated). It is notable that this law comments on instruction. I saw no evidence of any kind of state mandated “character” instruction at my research site. At the city level, New York City, which has one of the largest school systems in the country, has a policy entitled *Respect for All*. *Respect for All* is primarily a document that identifies discriminatory behavior and explains procedures for making a complaint about discriminatory behavior. This document, however, does not include any provision about educating students or teachers on gender bias.

In 2009-2010 the New York City Department of Education audited incident reports in order to document “bias-related infractions of the Student Discipline Code.” Bias-related incidents accounted for 5.8% or 8,298 of behavioral incidents recorded that year. Sixty four percent of those incidents accounting for were categorized as bias related to gender. In a separate category an additional 9.1% of incidents were categorized as relating to “gender identity, gender expression and sexual orientation” (New York City Department of Education, n.d., unpaginated). This is an increase by almost 10 percentage points from 2008-09 when gender bias related incidents accounted for 55% of the incidents. The second highest percentage occurred in the category of race which in 2008-09 represented 21% of the incidents, but was down to 16% in 2009-10.

The absence of any explicit educational policy related to gender in the last 20 years, though gender bias, as well as bias related to sex identification and orientation, is still evident in schools, is curious. While families and school administrators are working to create awareness around a

generic idea of bullying, little attention is being paid to gender discrimination. Is the lack of discussion around gender issues a manifestation of postfeminist ideology that assumes gender issues were resolved with the Title IX in 1972? What does this reveal about the perceived role of public education in addressing gender issues?

In this section I have argued that defining a single problem around gender and gender relations in Kindergarten through 12th grade public education is difficult primarily because of an absence of discussion around these issues both in educational research and in educational policy. Though gender-based issues are prominent in politics and contemporary culture, they are not prioritized in public education. As such, my research questions, necessarily, are exploratory in nature.

Framing the research questions

For me it was important to design questions and use a research methodology that allowed me to go beyond statistics and look qualitatively at the experience of girls in school. Middle school was chosen because of the focus in those grades on a socio-emotional curriculum in order to support the transitions being made from the elementary school model and the challenges of early adolescence, particularly for girls. This dissertation draws on ethnographic research conducted in an urban, public middle school in the 2013-14 school year. The research design included focus groups and interviews with female students in sixth and seventh grade and their teachers in order to understand the experience of girls in middle school, specifically in the context of postfeminism. This dissertation examines girls' and their teachers' understanding of gender relations in their school. Specifically my research questions were:

1. How do female middle school students and their teachers experience gender and gender relations in the school context (classroom, cafeteria, school yard)? How do they make meaning of their experiences? (For example, how do they take up, appropriate, and/or resist discourses about gender from the school and district?)
2. In what ways do the experiences of middle school girls align or conflict with prevailing postfeminist discourses and how does the intersection of experience and discourse impact their understanding of gender equity at their school?

Overview of the dissertation

The dissertation is organized thematically. The next two chapters discuss the theoretical framework and methodology used in the dissertation. The data chapters which follow present the research findings thematically. These chapters start by creating the context for the girls' experiences in school by focusing on their primary, daily concerns and then go on to focus on two specific themes - gender dominance and practices of response and resistance. The last data chapter discusses the issue of teacher perception of gender identity and relations at Fort Defiance Middle School (FDMS) and offers my theory on how gender inequity is perpetuated at FDMS.

Chapter Two describes the theoretical framework used in this research project. I draw primarily on feminist and postfeminist theory to analyze and interpret the language and actions of the students and teachers at FDMS. Also touched on in this chapter is Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's important work on systemic racism which was critical to my understanding of postfeminism. Chapter Three explains the methodology and methods used to conduct this study. The research

site and participants are also introduced in this chapter as well as my reflections on “getting in” to the research site and building relationships with students, teachers and administrators.

Limitations of the study are also discussed.

The first data chapter, Chapter Four, examines what I found to be the key themes describing the overall experience of girls in middle school. The themes of this chapter are drawn from my field notes as well as from focus groups and individual interviews with girls in sixth and seventh grade. Teachers were also interviewed for their thoughts on what they perceived to be the biggest issues for girls in the school. These themes reveal issues that were of greatest concern to the girls, including maintaining friendships with both boys and girls and the “drama” described to me as the “he said/she said” or the gossip about friendships, romantic relationships and betrayals that led to verbal and physical fights between girls. This chapter reveals the different struggles the girls faced on a daily basis in school. The girls and teachers agreed that these struggles were gender specific and that while boys may have to deal with the occasional drama, for example, it was usually settled fairly quickly and did not impact the boys as deeply as it did the girls. This chapter also reveals the universality of these issues among the girls regardless of their standing in the social hierarchy of the school.

Chapter Five describes the issues of gender dominance and gender segregation at FDMS. Most of the girls at FDMS agreed that the boys “ran” the school. Through verbal and physical harassment of girls in the classroom and in the hallways the boys were able to implement and maintain their dominance. I will argue that this is a form of symbolic violence. In addition to the dominance over the girls, boys also dominated the schools’ resources and had a variety of

programs designed just for them. FDMS experimented with single gender elective courses the year that I was there. As such gender essentialism was a constant undercurrent I observed in the school. I suggest that this essentializing aided in the boys dominance and contributed to the ability of the teachers to rationalize the boys' behavior.

In Chapter Six I present some of the strategies used by girls to negotiate the school environment. Strategies for dealing with teachers as well as academic insecurities included willful non-participation in class. This occurred, for example, when a girl would put her head down on her desk for the bulk of a class period or put her hood up over her head and not speak to anyone during class. These acts of resistance were often overlooked in large classes with more boisterous students. Many teachers acknowledged that this behavior would likely be overlooked in a class in which so many other students, both male and female, were demanding attention. In this chapter I also look at how girls attempt to control the narrative about what is happening to them and others in school and in this way negotiate their own identity development. This was evident when girls rejected their own bad grades in class by crumpling up their papers in front of the teacher or when they challenged disciplinary actions made by the teachers. In one case a female student who had been repeatedly disciplined by a teacher in class shouted out "why am I on everybody's radar today?" and then proudly stated "It's because I'm aggressive" (Field notes, 12/11/3). Finally this chapter looks at some of the postfeminist practices that the girls engaged in to stave off harassment from boys both in the classroom and in the hallways. Despite the school structures that were in place to encourage close and trusting relationships between students and teachers and despite what the girls had learned about bullying in school and how to deal with it, they developed individual strategies for dealing with the physical and verbal

harassment they encountered from the boys at school. I argue that these strategies are postfeminist in their demonstration of individual responsibility over institutional assistance and in the girls' insistence that they must engage in these strategies rather than demand that the boys alter their behavior. The employment of these practices in the school environment had real consequences for the girls both academically and socially.

In Chapter Seven I look at how teachers and administrators perceive gender and gender relations in the school. This includes their own relationships with students. In this chapter I focus on both the language teachers use to understand and tolerate the way the male and female students relate to one another as well as the actions and inactions that make teachers complicit in the boys' gender dominance in the school. This chapter also discusses the essentialist beliefs about boys and girls evident in the teachers' language and behavior. Finally this chapter offers my theory on why essentialism is embraced by the teachers as a way to explain accepted behavioral problems in the school environment.

Finally in the Conclusion I discuss the findings from the research. I will also suggest recommendations for school-based changes. For example, revamping the generic anti-bullying curriculum that fails to overtly address sexism, racism or homophobia. I argue that a more content specific curriculum could work to end the implicit acceptance of sexism in the school and create a more gender equitable environment.

Conclusion

In September 2014 when I began writing up my findings for this dissertation Baltimore Ravens football player Ray Rice was accused of physically abusing his wife in an elevator. His formal punishment from the National Football League (NFL) was a two game suspension. Feminist organizations and others were outraged and petitioned the NFL to take his crime more seriously by imposing a stronger punishment. Eventually a video showing Rice beating his wife was released to the public and Roger Goodell, the Commissioner of the NFL, was forced to ban Ray Rice from professional football. This ban was later overturned.

On the night of the first Ravens' game following Rice's suspension, sports commentator James Brown gave a pre-game speech challenging all men "to seriously confront the problem of domestic violence." Brown went on to say that it is time to take all our anger and outrage at this situation and "do something" and called for "ongoing comprehensive education of men about what healthy, respectful manhood is all about." He continued saying "it starts with how we view women, our language is important" ("CBS Thursday Night Football", 2014). His comments were widely reported and admired in the media the following day (Hartmann, 2014; McDonald, 2014). As Chris Chase wrote in *USA Today*: "In a tough situation, CBS captured the right tone. That was due, in large part, to the presence of Brown" (Chase, 2014). This incident epitomizes the frustration I have felt in the last several years around the discussion of women and girls' issues in politics and in the media. I applaud Brown's words and certainly broadcasting his monologue during a pre-game show is not business as usual for the NFL. However, that it has to be explicitly stated in 2014 that making disparaging comments such as "you throw like a girl" is offensive and demeaning to women suggests that our culture is in dire need of education when it comes to truly understanding gender equity. Overlooked by the media in Brown's statement is

his suggestion for “ongoing comprehensive education” about what healthy manhood is all about. I suggest that the appropriate site for the comprehensive education that Brown spoke of exists -- it is public school. As educators we must have the courage to insist that public schools take on this critical role in our society.

In this dissertation I will argue that middle school girls face both physical and verbal harassment on a daily basis and in front of school faculty and administrators and that schools must acknowledge and address this issue. Despite the presence of a pervasive socio-emotional curriculum at my research site that sought to build community, especially trust between students and faculty, and asserted a strong, but generic anti-bullying curriculum, the harassment continued. Girls recognize that there is an acceptance of certain “boy” behaviors that they must learn to negotiate on their own. I will argue that public schools have both the opportunity and the responsibility to be the site for the kind of “ongoing and comprehensive education” for both boys and girls that is needed in order to achieve gender equity.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework

Introduction

In this chapter I explicate the major theories that frame my research project. I am a feminist researcher and this project is largely informed by feminist ideology, but it is critical to point to a few other theorists here, such as Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, who led me to explore the concept of postfeminism through his work on institutionalized racism. Postfeminist ideology, working in concert with neoliberalism, emphasizes the notion that, because of anti-discriminatory legislation and the dominant narrative of competition, individuality and meritocracy in the United States, feminism and advocacy for girls and women is no longer needed. Postfeminism is a reaction to, and works in opposition to, feminist ideals. In this dissertation I will argue that postfeminism works to obscure sexism in the middle school. Because of its prevalent role in educational reform and research and close relationship to postfeminism, I will also briefly review the concept of neoliberalism -- specifically the neoliberal critique of education and the relationship of second wave feminism to neoliberalism.

It is also critical to note here that most feminist theory asserts that there is a “matrix of oppression” for women of color and working class and poor women which include gender, race and class (Hill Collins, 1990). At my research site the girls who were my research participants were largely Latina and African-American, most coming from economically disadvantaged families and communities. Their race and class were clearly important factors in understanding their oppression as girls at the school. However, my research focused on how girls experience gender and gender relations in the institution of public school. Thus, I have not included factors

of race and class in my analysis, limiting myself to the topic of the dissertation — gender. While I cannot speak to the specific racial and class based oppression of my research participants, in the brief overview of second wave feminism that follows I will explicate how race and class work to create a form of oppression that is specific to low income women and girls of color, the subjects of my study.

While I have long been a student of feminism, I did not come to a familiarity with postfeminism until I started to plan my research project. In fact I struggled to find theories that would explain issues of deep concern to me in education and society at large. For example, in my second semester of graduate school I was stunned to learn that over 75% of Kindergarten through 12th grade teachers were women (NCES, 2010). This statistic is largely unchanged since the Common School Era of the late 1800s. More surprising was to learn that this was not considered to be an issue in education. Not only is gender and teaching not a topic with much dedicated research (Acker, 1995; Sabbe & Aeltermann, 2007; Galman & Mallozzi, 2012), but the over-representation of women in teaching is not actively pursued as a concern in contemporary education in the United States (AACTE, 2010). In other graduate courses I read economic, sociological and psychological research that attempted to explain the phenomena of job segregation by gender, but they did not address the lack of interest or debate on the topic of female teachers (Hartmann, 1976; Correll, 2004). Eventually, a professor suggested that I read Eduardo Bonilla-Silva in hopes that his theory of institutionalized racism might be useful to me. His work, which I will review briefly below, provided an integral step towards my understanding of how postfeminist ideology works to mask gender inequity.

In his book *Racism without Racists*, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva argues for the existence of a new racial ideology in the United States that he refers to as color-blind racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2010). He explains that, as opposed to the overt racism that was common in the Jim Crow era, contemporary racism is more covert, but still insidious. Bonilla-Silva writes “color-blind racism serves today as the ideological armor for a covert and institutionalized system in the post-Civil Rights era” (Bonilla-Silva, 2010, p. 3). He suggests that color-blind racism works in this way: “whites rationalize minorities’ contemporary status as the products of market dynamics, naturally occurring phenomena, and blacks’ imputed cultural limitations” (Bonilla-Silva, 2010, p. 2). In other words, the belief that the United States is now a “post-racial society” is largely the reason that color-blind racism works. If discrimination of all kinds is illegal, and if affirmative action is in place and ultimately, if the president of the United States is an African-American man, it can be argued that meritocracy is uninhibited, that indeed every citizen has an equal chance to achieve whatever goals s/he has. As Bonilla-Silva argues “color-blind racism has rearticulated elements of traditional liberalism (work ethic, rewards by merit, equal opportunity, individualism, etc.) for racially illiberal goals” (Bonilla-Silva, 2010, p. 7).

Bonilla-Silva draws on Marx to explain why the dominant class works to perpetuate color-blind racism. He argues that racialized social structures continue to exist because “they benefit members of the dominant race” (Bonilla-Silva, 2010, p. 9). And, that “the frameworks of the dominant race tend to become the master frameworks upon which all racial actors ground (for or against) their ideological positions” (Bonilla-Silva, 2010, p. 9).

Applying Bonilla-Silva's ideas about race and racism to how gender and sexism work in contemporary culture led me to explore the concept of postfeminism. I argue that postfeminism has similar rationales and consequences to "post-racism." In the same way that color blind racism works to covertly perpetuate racism, postfeminism, in its insistence on the existence of gender equity, obscures the presence of sexism in daily life. Though there are variations on the definition, postfeminism is an ideology that asserts that feminism, and collective action by women and those who advocate for their rights, is no longer needed in contemporary Western societies because gender equity has been achieved (Showden, 2009; McRobbie, 2009; Genz & Brabon, 2009; Skelton & Francis, 2009). Postfeminism is closely linked to neoliberalism and its tenets of individual action and responsibility rather than reliance on government and advocacy. I suggest that the lack of research on gender and teaching, for example, is a logical outcome of postfeminist ideology. There is an over-representation of women in teaching Kindergarten – 12th grade students in public education, a relatively low-paying, low status position. Since women are supposedly free to choose whatever profession they like, however, this topic is not seen as worthy of investigation. Feminism and gender equity are not discussed because of the belief that equity has been achieved is accepted and propagated. I argue it is critical to identify instances of postfeminist ideals at work in the public school system, and consider how girls and women are experiencing its impact in this context.

I am suggesting, then, that postfeminism shares similarities with Bonilla-Silva's notion of color-blind racism. Postfeminist ideology exists in a similar "negative" space in which a belief that discrimination has been eliminated and problems of equity solved leads to an absence of discussion around gender in the U.S. educational system (Galman & Mallozzi, 2012). Bonilla-

Silva concludes his book with quotes from colleagues and students pleading with him to stop talking about racism because they believe that by talking about race and racism he is somehow “add[ing] wood to the racial fire, which is almost extinguished” (Bonilla-Silva, 2010, p. 261).

Applying postfeminist ideology as a theoretical framework in education presents a similar problem and one I encountered in my dissertation seminar from other students. Why re-introduce sexism, an issue whose time has passed in education? Likewise as postfeminism largely works to obscure sexism it is challenging to research that which has been rendered invisible. I did not name a specific problem within the large realm of gender and public education to address with my research. Rather, I wanted to explore the current educational landscape to examine the ways in which postfeminist ideology works to silence discussions of gender and the impact of that silence for girls and women in middle school.

Equally as important in terms of my theoretical framework is the work of psychologist Derald Wing Sue who writes about racial, gender-based and homophobic microaggressions. Sue describes microaggressions as “the brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial, gender, sexual-orientation, and religious slights and insults to the target person or group” (Sue, 2010, p. 5). Sue explains “as our society has become more aware of what constitutes sexism and its harmful impact on women, the conscious, intentional, and deliberate forms of gender bias have seemingly decreased, but also continue in the form of subtle and unintentional expressions” (Sue, 2010, p. 11). Importantly he stresses that,

these subtle forms of sexism...come from well-intentioned men who believe in gender equality and would never deliberately discriminate against women. Yet, they

unknowingly engage in behaviors that place women at a disadvantage, infantilize or stereotype them, and treat them in such a manner as to deny them equal access and opportunity. (Sue, 2010, p. 11-12)

Like Bonilla-Silva, Sue reminds us that while no one is likely to claim their ideological position as a sexist, people continue, through their words and actions, to perpetuate sexism. Sue argues that the first task towards combatting sexism is to make “the ‘invisible’ visible” (Sue, 2010, p. 20). Understanding how microaggression works in daily life helps to shine a light on those invisible acts of sexism.

Gender

It is important to acknowledge what I mean by gender in this dissertation. Sociologist Hester Eisenstein (2009) argues that the struggle for women’s rights in the United States has resulted in the division between sex (biological characteristics), and gender (social and cultural constructions of the body). When the two are conflated in talking about women, it is deemed essentialist; gender is not the sum of our reproductive organs. I agree with Bonilla-Silva and education scholar Zeus Leonardo who argue that while gender, class, race and language are socially constructed categories, they have a “social reality” (Bonilla-Silva, 2010, p. 9). As Bonilla-Silva explains “after race – or class or gender – is created, it produced real effects on the actors racialized as ‘black’ or ‘white’” (Bonilla-Silva, 2010, p. 9). Similarly, once an actor is gendered there are real effects to being “male” or “female” in one’s lived experiences. Leonardo also addresses the notion of the social construction of race which is applicable to the social construction of gender. He writes:

Productive (rather than productivist) readings of race avoid the pitfalls of two positions: traditional identity politics and beyond identity politics. Identity may not be real (i.e. material) like the economy but it produces real consequences as racialized subjects act *as if they were real*. (Leonardo, 2009, p. 56, emphasis in the original)

Here rather than pointing to the historical pitfalls of identity politics as other scholars do (Eisenstein, 2009; Fraser, 2005), Leonardo makes a critical point about how identity politics work in the real world. While I appreciate the importance of Judith Butler's (1990) notion that gender is socially constructed and performative, the fact remains that we live within these social constructs and are forced to perform some aspect of gender every day. The way in which we relate to those constructs and perform our identity each day and how that is perceived by others has, as Leonardo says, real consequences for us as individuals and as women. It is the real consequences of gender I am interested in examining here.

Feminism and Postfeminism

This section informs my research in several ways. First it provides a brief overview of feminism and a genealogy of postfeminism. Likewise, it defines terms that often have varying meaning such as "second wave," "third wave" and postfeminism. While many scholars question or critique the continued use of the wave metaphor in discussing the history of feminism (Laughlin, Gallagher, Cobble & Boris, 2010) and some choose to work with more specific feminist terms (girl power, do-me feminism, etc.), I find the wave metaphor a helpful way to make broad comparisons between different eras. Because the waves are almost always identified temporally, I also find them useful in considering the socio-economic and political context of each "wave."

These contexts are unquestionably impactful on the achievements of each wave and the way in which we perceive them. Secondly, this section explicates the ways in which the tenets of postfeminism manifest themselves in a variety of media and its pervasiveness in U.S. culture. To be clear, the history of feminism is long and multi-faceted. What is presented here is only an overview in order to clarify terms and make distinctions towards an understanding of postfeminism.

I will briefly review first, second and third wave feminism in order to clarify the distinctions between the waves and identify postfeminism, not as another wave in feminist chronology, but rather as an attempt to bring an end to feminism and advocacy for women. The tenets of postfeminism are constructed in relation to the ideals of second-wave feminism (McRobbie, 2009) and postfeminism occurs concurrently with third wave feminism. For those reasons I will focus my discussion on those two movements and simply define first wave feminism as the women's movement in the late 19th and early 20th century primarily concerned with women's suffrage.

Second wave feminism

For my purposes here second-wave feminism will be defined as the women's movement that took place from the early 1960s through the late 1980s. Second wave is also typically characterized by legislation related to women's rights such as Title IX (1972), which prohibits exclusion because of gender from any educational program receiving federal funds, and the Women's Educational Equity Act (1974), which protects women from discrimination in education. Another major component of second wave was the collective nature of its protests

and advocacy in a range of areas from politics and education to women's health issues. A number of organizations including National Organization for Women (NOW), National Women's Political Caucus and Women's Equity Action League filed lawsuits, put forward anti-discriminatory legislation and female political candidates (Eisenstein, 2009; Baumgardner & Richards, 2010). As Hester Eisenstein describes "the second wave set out to contest every aspect of culture and social norms that circumscribed the lives of women" (Eisenstein, 2009, p. 56). Many working class women and women of color did not feel their concerns and experiences were accurately represented by second wave feminists (The Combahee River Collective, 1997; Hill-Collins, 1997; Mohanty, 1988; Moraga, C. & Anzaldúa, G., 2002), but the movement included large numbers of women from grassroots activists to lawyers and politicians who worked on a variety of issues to enact a multitude of changes for women in the United States.

Because the bulk of my girl research participants were Black and Latinas from low income families and communities, it is important to consider the ways in which feminist theory affirms the interlocking oppressions of gender, race and class. In the second wave era, this was examined and addressed primarily by feminists of color. In the Combahee River Collective's seminal statement "A Black Feminist Statement" (1977) women of color asserted that Black feminism had been evolving in connection with second wave feminism since the 1960's. They wrote: "Black, other Third World, and working women have been involved in the feminist movement from its start, but both outside reactionary forces and racism and elitism within the movement itself have served to obscure our participation" (The Combahee River Collective, 1997, p. 64). Many of second wave's concerns catered to middle class white women. For example, mainstream or liberal feminism supported white middle class women's desire for the

opportunity to work outside of the home. African-American and Latina women had been forced to work outside of their homes throughout history and did not see this as a gain for women of color. In writing about their beliefs the Collective states: “It is apparent that no other ostensibly progressive movement has ever considered our specific oppression a priority or worked seriously for the ending of that oppression” (The Combahee River Collective, 1997, p. 65).

Another important distinction made between the position of African-American feminists and white feminists is that African-American feminists feel the pervasiveness of race and racism in American culture and “feel solidarity with progressive black men and do not advocate the fractionalization that white women who are separatists demand” (The Combahee River Collective, 1997, p. 65). Another critical tenet of Black feminism was going beyond implications of gender bias to include examinations of race and class bias as well. One particular idea that resonates with my research findings and is in opposition to second wave white lesbian feminists’ mandate for separatism is the Collective’s assertion that “as black women we find any type of biological determinism a particularly dangerous and reactionary basis upon which to build a politic” (The Combahee River Collective, 1997, p. 66).

Patricia Hill Collins echoes the Collective’s assertions on the need to examine the interlocking systems of oppression that African-American women face. She writes:

Developing adequate definitions of Black feminist thought involves facing this complex nexus of relationships among biological classification, the social construction of race and gender as categories of analysis, the material conditions accompanying these changing

social constructions, and Black women's consciousness about these themes. (Hill Collins, 1997, p. 243)

Hill Collins also notes African-American women's particular relationship to theory and practice. She writes: "Black women's standpoint rejects either/or dichotomous thinking that claims that *either* thought *or* concrete action is desirable and that merging the two limits the efficacy of both" (Hill Collins, 1997, p. 249, italics in the original). She goes on to explain that "denied positions as scholars and writers which allow us to emphasize purely theoretical concerns" Black women intellectuals draw on a history of activism in the Black female community and are activists as well (Hill Collins, 1997, p. 249). Hill Collins emphasizes the "tradition of using everyday actions and experiences" within Black feminist theoretical work (Hill Collins, 1997, p. 249).

In her essay on the seminal anthology of writing by feminists of color from 1981, *This Bridge Called My Back*, Norma Alarcón notes that: "Anglo-American feminist theory assumes a speaking subject who is an autonomous, self-conscious individual woman" (Alarcón, 1997, p. 295). Conversely, she writes: "The woman of color has a 'plural personality'" (Alarcón, 1997, p. 295). Her point is to remind us that women of color who have suffered under multiple forms of oppression, including the oppression of their language, often do not fit neatly into the Anglo-American or mainstream, liberal feminist singular description, but rather encompass a range of identity descriptors that relate to their primary language, their ethnic heritage, their socio-economic status and their sexual orientation. This is a critical point especially when applying a feminist lens to early adolescent girls of color like the ones in my study. Black feminism then differs from liberal or mainstream second wave feminism in its primary focus on Black women

and other women of color's experiences and the intersection of gender, race and class as oppressive structures. Likewise, their opposition to biological determinism and strong position on the relevance and importance of everyday actions in their theoretical work sets their ideology apart from other branches of second wave feminism.

Later in this chapter I will present an argument for second wave feminism's contribution to the current neo-liberal agenda and to the creation of postfeminism. It is important to recognize that second wave feminism was comprised of many branches, not all of which worked to contribute to neoliberal and postfeminist ideologies. Three major factions within second wave feminism include: liberal feminism, also considered to be mainstream feminism (some of whose ideals can be seen as complicit with neoliberal ideology); radical feminism which stressed the importance of the interpersonal power of men over women; and Marxist feminism which focused on defining the ways in which women are oppressed through capitalism.

Liberal feminists largely called for institutional reform and advocated for protective legislation such as Title IX, and were generally considered to be middle and upper class white women with resources to produce social change within existing economic and political systems. These are the feminists who called for "choice" and women's "empowerment" which, it will be argued later, melded neatly with neoliberal ideals of competition and meritocracy (Eisenstein, 2009; Fraser, 2005).

Conversely, radical feminism eschewed tactics such as legislation and the election of female political candidates and called for nothing short of revolution (Firestone, 1997). In her important

radical feminist work *The Dialectic of Sex*, Shulamith Firestone writes: “Feminists have to question, not just all of *Western* culture, but the organization of culture itself, and further, even the very organization of nature” (Firestone, 1997, p. 20, italics in the original). Radical feminists believed that men, rather than institutions, are the oppressors and that the nature of gender relations must be changed (Redstockings Manifesto, 1969). They held consciousness-raising sessions and believed, as other feminists, that “the personal is political” (Redstockings Manifesto, 1969). While radical feminists appreciated the analytical methods of Marx and Engels, they did not believe that an economic interpretation of oppression goes far enough. Instead their primary focus was on ending patriarchy as a system of oppression. Radical feminism highlighted the issue of masculine power, but a critique of this ideological tenet is that it relied on the assumption of gender essentialism (Messerschmidt, 2009).

Lastly, two other major factions of second wave feminism were Marxist feminists and Socialist feminists. While the two branches are related by certain ideals, such as the role of capitalism in women’s oppression, there are nuanced differences between them. Marxist feminists believed that capitalism must be eliminated in order to gain gender equity. From a Marxist feminist perspective then primacy is given to class oppression over gender oppression. Critics argue that Marxist feminism “reduces sex oppression to class oppression” (Holmstrom, 2002, p. 5).

Alternatively, Socialist feminists “see class as central to women’s live, yet at the same time none would reduce sex or race oppression to economic exploitation” (Holmstrom, 2002, p. 2).

Socialist feminists see women’s oppression as a function of both capitalism and patriarchy. Women of color argued that focusing on only these two oppressive systems made socialist

feminism blind to racial oppression (Holmstrom, 2002), although other feminist historians assert that racism was always a factor in social feminist theory and work (Lapovsky Kennedy, 2008). Far from being monolithic, second wave feminism encompassed a range of women's interests, ideologies and tactics for social change. While tenets of liberal or mainstream feminism came to be aligned with neoliberal ideologies that contributed to postfeminism, not all branches of second wave feminism were complicit with neoliberal ideals.

The second wave is associated with its media icon Gloria Steinem and writers such as Betty Friedan, Gayle Rubin, Patricia Hill Collins, Nancy Hartstock, Shulamith Firestone, and Adrienne Rich among many, many others. Second wave is generally considered to have begun to phase out in the mid-1980s during the conservative Reagan presidency and in the early 1990s when feminist writers such as Naomi Wolf and Rebecca Walker call for a renewed feminism or a third wave of feminism (Baumgarten & Richards, 2010).

Third wave feminism

After the second wave era "concludes," third wave and postfeminism emerge. Though third-wave feminism and postfeminism are happening contemporaneously it is not hard to distinguish between them. Both respond to the tenets of second wave feminism, but only postfeminism insists that gender equity has been achieved and feminism is no longer necessary. Most feminist texts cite the early nineties as the beginning of the third wave (Baumgardner & Richards, 2010). Specifically when feminist activist Rebecca Walker declared in *Ms.* magazine in response to a *New York Times*' article about postfeminism: "I am not a post feminist feminist. I am the Third Wave" (Baumgardner & Richards, 2010, p. 77). In 1992 Walker, along with others, founded the

Third Wave Foundation which raises money and gives grants to girls and women. In 1995 Walker edited the important third wave anthology *To Be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism*. Gloria Steinem writes in the forward that she is sometimes frustrated by the way in which the young feminists in the book blame second wave feminism for the issues that they encounter as young women today. Likewise, many of the books' contributors focus on what feminism told them not to do (shave their legs, wear make-up, become a mother, etc.). For example, in the introduction of *To Be Real*, Walker writes "for many of us it seems that to be a feminist in the way that we have seen or understood feminism is to conform to an identity and way of living that doesn't allow for individuality, complexity, or less than perfect personal histories" (Walker, 1995, p. xxxiii). Steinem notes that many of these authors are responding to stereotypical or media-invented ideas of what feminism is. She gracefully concludes: "in our long journey toward freedom we must cherish one another's choices" (Steinem, 1995, p. xxvi). The essays collected in the anthology are diverse in their topics and very personal. They are more about individuals finding their voices than a cry for collective action.

Another seminal third wave text, *Manifesta* (2000), takes a slightly different tack on the relationship of second wave to third wave. While honoring individual voices and perspectives on feminist issues, the authors of *Manifesta* are clear that, however women come to be feminists and whatever their primary concerns are, if feminists do not collectively advocate for women's rights they will never be achieved. The book includes women's history, history of feminism, "consciousness-raising" facts about inequality and suggestions about how to be an activist. The authors also note that "rebellious acts or personal choices shouldn't be construed as the same as political activism" (Baumgardner & Richards, 2010, p. 19). In *Manifesta* the authors share their

definition of “feminist”, but also write that “in reality, there is no formal alliance of women we can call ‘the feminists’” (Baumgardner & Richards, 2010, p. 54).

Both *Manifesta* and *To Be Real* share the format and goal for other third wave texts -- coming to feminist choices through personal discovery. As one scholar notes “the majority of third wave feminist texts are currently anthologies that work to build sentiment for the movement through relaying personal experiences” (Murphy, 2008, p. 24). While consciousness-raising, a hallmark of second wave feminism, also encouraged women to consider the ways in which the “personal was political,” second wave feminists were seen as an identifiable group of individuals (which was often considered to be “led” by Gloria Steinem) who collectively advocated for women’s rights. As noted above, for third wave feminism the absence of a formal alliance of women or perhaps the presence of many formal alliances such as the Feminist Majority, National Organization of Women, Third Wave Foundation and others had the effect of making feminism more pervasive but also arguably more diffuse. An important message of third wave’s *Manifesta* is that women can and should be political, but they needn’t be seen as radical. Without a visible leader in the media and radical acts that garner attention, third wave feminism remains somewhat under the political and media radar.

Postfeminism

Postfeminism is also derived largely from second wave feminism. Whereas third wave feminism seeks to understand how women can rectify personal choices such as getting married or becoming a mother with what they perceive to be the mandates of feminism, postfeminism emphasizes that there is no longer a need for feminism at all. Though postfeminism is written

about in different ways, primarily in critiques of popular culture and media, there are a few tenets that appear to be constant. First is the idea that postfeminism is not just “after” feminism, but that it is opposed to feminist ideals specifically as they were manifest in the 1960’s and 70’s. British cultural theorist Angela McRobbie explains the term postfeminism writing “a situation which is marked by a new kind of anti-feminist sentiment which is different from simply being a question of backlash against the seeming gains made by feminist activities and campaigns in an earlier period” (McRobbie, 2009, p. 1). She goes further arguing that:

Elements of feminism have been taken into account, and have been absolutely incorporated into political and institutional life. Drawing on a vocabulary that includes words like “empowerment” and “choice,” these elements are then converted into a much more individualistic discourse, and they are deployed in this new guise, particularly in media and popular culture, but also by agencies of the state, as a kind of substitute for feminism. (McRobbie, 2009, p. 1)

McRobbie goes onto say that the reason for this is “to ensure that a new women’s movement will not re-emerge” (McRobbie, 2009, p.1). British cultural theorist Rosalind Gill agrees with McRobbie that postfeminism is not just a backlash but that it has co-opted many of the terms and ideals of second wave feminism and used those to construct a postfeminist subject whose choices revolve around spending money in order to make herself more attractive (Gill, 2008). Some suggest that postfeminism co-opts ideals of feminism, but also reacts against the “victim feminism” of the past (Showden, 2009), that is, a feminism that complains about what women do not have and ignores the social power that women hold. This idea was exemplified in an article in *The New Yorker* about Sheryl Sandberg, the Chief Operating Officer at Facebook, in which she acknowledges institutional issues around women in the workplace but states “much too much

of the conversation is on blaming others, and not enough is on taking responsibility ourselves” (Auletta, 2011, p. 60). She goes on to say that she opposes all form of affirmative action for women because “if you don’t believe there is a glass ceiling, there is no need” (Auletta, 2011, p. 60).

Second, postfeminism is about individual, not collective actions and achievement and as such it is actively apolitical. Advocates of postfeminism argue that individual women have had barriers cleared for them by earlier women’s rights movements and are free to access education at all levels as well as job titles, salaries and economic power. Because young women have grown up with feminism, postfeminist advocates argue that they have internalized feminist ideals and benefit from feminist achievements of earlier waves so there is no real reason to organize with other feminists. As Showden notes “there is little need for collective action – and the sacrifice that comes with it – when all that is left to achieve is a proper psychological orientation toward one’s own political and economic opportunities” (Showden, 2009, p. 174).

Third, postfeminism is connected to the socio-economic climate through a focus on individual women as consumers. In the introduction to their anthology, *Interrogating Postfeminism*, Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra note: “postfeminist culture...works to commodify feminism via the figure of woman as an empowered consumer” (Tasker and Negra, 2007, p. 2). This idea is reiterated by educational researchers Christine Skelton and Becky Francis in their book on the current “schooling scandal” in the United Kingdom. They argue:

It is the socio-economic climate that has had a dramatic impact on the perceived relevance (or irrelevance) of feminism. In a neoliberal policy environment where

individuals of both genders are expected to see their labour in global market place, and are positioned as responsible for their own success or failure therein, liberal feminist concerns of opening up the market to women may be read as having largely been addressed. (Skelton and Francis, 2009, p. 8)

Media and culture studies, which often utilize postfeminism as an analytical lens, identify popular “chick lit” character Bridget Jones, television’s Ally McBeal, a single, successful lawyer, and the women from the *Sex in the City* series as ideal postfeminist subjects (McRobbie, 2009; Genz, 2010; Genz & Brabon, 2009; Taylor, 2012). Not only are these women attractive and apt to spend money on being attractive, they benefit from the forms of gender equity that were achieved by the second-wave feminism. They are educated and financially independent with good jobs in high-powered fields supporting the postfeminist idea that gender equity has been achieved and feminism is no longer needed (Kinser, 2004, Showden, 2009). They are participants in the market as professionals and consumers and both roles are crucial to their identity.

Postfeminism then, in its individual and meritocratic ideals, is strongly connected to neoliberalism. In writing about postfeminism Showden explains that some postfeminists claim “that feminists have erased women’s agency and are seeking state protection of special interests rather than trying to grow up and take care of themselves” (Showden, 2009, p. 171). Gill and Scharff (2011) suggest that postfeminism “is not simply a response to feminism but also a sensibility that is at least partly constituted through the pervasiveness of neoliberal ideals” (p. 7). They also posit the question “could it be that neoliberalism *is always already gendered*, and that women are constructed as its ideal subjects?” (Gill & Scharff, 2011, p. 7, emphasis in the

original). Anthea Taylor in her book on single women as represented in the media writes “postfeminism, then, is in effect neoliberalism gendered feminine and articulated to feminist-inspired discourses of autonomy, freedom, and choice for women” (Taylor, 2012, p. 15). She goes on to say that some critics use the phrase “neoliberal postfeminism” to emphasize their “ideological symbiosis” (Taylor, 2012, p. 15). In other words, following the argument of scholars who write about neoliberal economy and feminism -- such as Nancy Fraser and Hester Eisenstein -- women who fought for the right to equal access to education and jobs came to, purposefully or not, fully espouse and promote the neoliberal ideals of competition and individual freedom. This idea will be explored in more depth in the next section.

Finally, because of its focus on meritocracy and consumerism, postfeminism propagates values that are considered to be white and middle class (Tasker & Negra, 2007). And by consistently emphasizing women’s role in creating and sustaining traditional families, specifically by focusing on what single, career women are “missing,” postfeminism is firmly rooted in heteronormativity (Showden, 2009; Taylor, 2012).

Neoliberal critique of education

A dominant ideology critiqued in contemporary education is neoliberalism. In order to help structure a postfeminist critique of education I will briefly review the critique of neoliberal ideology in education and consider the role of gender in neoliberal policy. Henry Giroux argues that far from being an “‘economic discourse’ neoliberalism is an ideology, a politics and at times a fanaticism that subordinates the art of democratic politics to the rapacious laws of a market economy that expands its reach to include all aspects of social life” (Giroux, 2005, p. 12). He

goes on to say neoliberalism is implicitly a “cultural theory – a historical and socially constructed ideology” (Giroux, 2005, p. 12). While there is extensive criticism of neoliberal education policies, this section will show that gender issues are absent from existing critiques and consider the role of feminism and postfeminism in the neoliberal critique.

Neoliberal policies and education “crisis” in the United States

The notion of the “crisis” in public education is not a new one. As many education researchers point out, public education has been in a series of crises from the launch of Sputnik satellite by the Soviet Union in the late 1950s to the *Nation at Risk* report in 1983, and the latest crisis prompted by *No Child Left Behind* legislation in 2001 (Goldstein, Macrine & Chesky, 2011; Giroux, 2010; Apple, 2001). Nor is the role of business - an incubator of neoliberal policy - in helping to create the education crisis a new twist. Jean Anyon (2005) argues that the problems outlined in the 1983 report on the state of public education, *Nation at Risk*, were actually in part a response by the business community to the changing nature of the global economy. That is, American manufacturers unable to match quality and prices of international competitors foisted the blame on the public education system. The current crisis in education uses the same tactics but with a different end goal in mind: the privatization of the public education system. Henry Giroux (2010) writes:

The current call for educational reform in the United States defines the crisis in a language and through a set of values that mimic the very free-market discourse at the heart of the economic and ideological forces that caused the financial meltdown in the first place. (p. 345)

The use of this language works to convince the public and is supported in the media because of the hegemony of neoliberalism. As Harvey (2005) describes, neoliberal ideology has “pervasive effects on ways of thought to the point where it has now become incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in and understand the world” (p. 3). The proposed remedies for the problems facing public education are deeply inscribed neoliberal solutions including school choice (primarily in the form of charter schools), privatization of schools (also in the form of charter schools), increased competition among schools, teachers and students through standardized testing and a shift toward individualist thinking which requires the demonization of teacher unions. Henry Giroux (2010) argues that:

Public schools are under attack not because they are failing or are inefficient but because they are public, an unwanted reminder of a public sphere and set of institutions whose purpose is to serve the common good and promote democratic ends, values, and social relations. (p. 348-9)

He contends that by positing standardized testing and competition as the solution in schools and increased practical training for teachers in teacher education, current education policies are creating students and teachers who do not know how to think or act critically and as such will not rail against neoliberal ideology. For Giroux and others, this is the real crisis in American education today.

Role of gender in current neoliberal agenda

While many authors have considered the role that neoliberalism has played and is playing in the manufactured crisis in public education (Berliner & Biddle, 1996) few have considered the role

that gender plays in the neoliberal agenda. Harvey (2005) mentions the impact of “accumulation by dispossession” on women. He writes:

Accumulation by dispossession typically undermines whatever powers women may have had within household production/marketing systems within traditional social structures and relocates everything in male-dominated commodity and credit markets. (Harvey, 2005, p. 170)

Harvey’s position is that neoliberalism is bad for women and indeed many people writing about the global impact of neoliberalism note that it has created hardships specifically for women (Eisenstein, 2009; Fraser, 2005). While gender does not play a major role in neoliberalism, some scholars argue that feminism does. The next section provides an overview of the role of second wave feminism and its relationship to neoliberalism.

Second wave feminism and neoliberalism

In the review of the work that follows, it is worth noting that critical theorist Nancy Fraser and sociologist Hester Eisenstein do not use gender as a lens to examine how women have fared in the neoliberal climate, but rather critique the role that second-wave feminism has played in neoliberal ideology. I recognize the significance of the difference between these two ideas, but have not found any literature that specifically focuses on gender and the neoliberal agenda in the United States. Both Fraser and Eisenstein explore the ways in which the ideologies of second-wave feminism and neoliberalism have affected women in a global context. I posit that their argument is an important precursor to understanding the development of postfeminism.

Nancy Fraser (2005) sets up the discussion of how feminism becomes complicit in the neoliberal project by examining the trajectory of feminism since the 1960s. Specifically, she critiques second-wave feminism for “reinvent[ing] itself as a politics of recognition” (Fraser, 2005, p. 296). Consumed or distracted by identity politics, feminism “neglected political economy and geopolitical developments” (Fraser, 2005, p. 296). Fraser succinctly sums up the results of that phase in the United States at the end of the 20th century and beginning of the 21st saying “feminists were surprised to find that, while we had been arguing about essentialism, an unholy alliance of free-marketeers and fundamentalist Christians had taken over the country” (Fraser, 2005, p. 301).

This important shift discussed by Fraser and the way in which the neoliberal movement used the ideals of mainstream feminism for the purposes of economic globalization are the subject of Hester Eisenstein’s book *Feminism Seduced* (2009). Eisenstein offers a critique of mainstream feminism but goes farther in demonstrating how specifically mainstream feminism has been complicit with neoliberalism and how the resultant economic globalization has led to the exploitation of women’s labor around the world. She argues that it is essential to maintain a class awareness in feminist issues as it is the class divide among women that has weakened the feminist movement by focusing primarily on the issues of white, middle class women. Below I will extract a few relevant ideas from her discussion.

Eisenstein’s critique of second-wave feminism is less focused on the role of identity politics and more on the neoliberal ideals that came to be espoused by what she calls “mainstream feminism.” Historically speaking Eisenstein (2009) reminds us that,

labor feminists of the 1940s and 1950s worked within the labor movement for a series of issues – equal pay, maternity leave, access to seniority, and child care – that would make it easier for women to combine work and family life. (p. 52)

In the 1960s when white middle class women entered the feminist debate they had a different approach to the issue of equality. As Eisenstein (2009) explains these educated women who did not have to work, but wanted to enter the workforce “rejected protection, and indeed sought (and won) affirmative action that would remove barriers to the most lucrative jobs in all areas of work, including those previously seen as strictly men’s jobs” (p. 53). From there, through a series of hard won battles mostly by and for white middle class women, there was what Eisenstein (2009) calls a “bourgeois revolution” (p. 64). In summing up the results of this revolution she notes:

In short, feminism, U.S. style, came to mean individualism and the right to participate in the market economy as a worker or entrepreneur in one’s own name, separated from one’s role as wife and/or mother. (Eisenstein, 2009, p. 65)

It is easy to see how these ideals translated into a belief in meritocracy, that is, if barriers were removed then there was nothing to stop any woman from succeeding in any profession. These then are the ideals that are exploited by the neoliberals in the 1990s towards globalization. Though they do not use the term “postfeminist,” Fraser and Eisenstein’s arguments demonstrate how the marriage of second wave feminism and neoliberalism paved the way for the inception of postfeminist ideology in the United States.

Postfeminism as an ideology in education

In this section I will argue that postfeminism is not simply the next phase of the feminist movement, but an ideology, and following the neoliberal critique of education, one that can be useful in analyzing the current state of schooling in the United States.

Postfeminism as an ideology

As mentioned earlier in this section, postfeminism is often considered to be merely a description of the diffuse status of feminism in the 21st century. In keeping with my argument of postfeminism as an ideology in this section I discuss scholars who are interested in the analytical possibilities of postfeminist theory. Stephanie Genz and Benjamin Brabon in their book, *Postfeminism: Cultural Texts and Theories*, write:

Rather than being tied to a specific contextual and epistemological framework, postfeminism emerges in the intersections and hybridization of mainstream media, consumer culture, neoliberal politics, postmodern theory and, significantly, feminism. (Genz and Brabon, 2009, p. 5)

As such, they see the potential of postfeminism for cultural analysis in neoliberal times. The postfeminism they refer to in their analysis is “characterized by the proliferation of media images and communication technologies and a neo-liberal, consumerist ideology that replaces collective, activist politics with more individualistic assertions of (consumer) choice and self-rule” (Genz and Brabon, 2009, p. 8).

While they are against creating a dichotomy within postfeminist theory, Genz and Brabon do identify a number of writers as “pro-postfeminist.” That is, writers who actively argue on behalf of and propagate the tenets of postfeminism. These include Naomi Wolf, Katie Roiphe and Rene Denfield who were writing in the early to mid 1990s. These pro-postfeminist writers agree that

feminism is no longer needed, either because its work is completed or because feminism “failed and is no longer valid” (Genz and Brabon, 2009, p. 13). They describe pro-postfeminist supporters as those who “support an individualistic and liberal agenda that relies on a mantra of choice and assumes that the political demands of first and second wave feminism have now been met” (Genz and Brabon, 2009, p. 14). Genz argues on behalf of postfeminism’s usefulness as a way to understand feminism in the early 21st century and invokes the idea of “micro-politics” to assert that ideas of postfeminism result from “individual and daily gender-based struggles” (Genz, 2006, p. 338).

Bonilla-Silva defines ideology in this way:

An ideology is not dominant because it affects all actors in a social system in the *same* way and to the *same* degree. Instead, an ideology is dominant if *most* members (dominant and subordinate) of a social system have to accommodate their views vis-à-vis that ideology. (Bonilla-Silva, 2010, p. 152, italics in the original)

I am suggesting, following Bonilla-Silva’s definition of an ideology, that ten years past the publication of the pro-postfeminist writers’ seminal books intended to critique the work of second wave feminism, postfeminism is an ideology within which most members of our social system in the U.S. have to accommodate their views. I argue that like neoliberalism and color-blind racism postfeminism is an ideology that pervades not only the media and popular culture but also, especially in its practices that overlap with neoliberalism, public education.

Postfeminism and education

In much of the literature and most media representations the postfeminist woman seems to emerge fully formed as a working adult. While we know she is shaped by popular media and commercial advertising, surely she is also influenced by state institutions such as public education. Part of my research was to better understand the ways in which public education is complicit with or resists postfeminist influences. Skelton and Francis in writing about gender and education in the United Kingdom, argue that the “‘schooling scandal’ of today is the unreflected and apparently uncontested re-emergence of gender stereotyping and discrimination as an aspect of pedagogy” (Skelton and Francis, 2009, p. 137). They suggest that by encouraging equal opportunity within existing systems of education, and through programs that acknowledge gender as relational, gender stereotypes are reified. They write:

If we accept ‘gender as relational’ (whereby boys and girls see themselves as opposites of each other) then something like GIST [a program promoting girls’ participation in science] was bound to fail as its basic premise – to make science more ‘girl-friendly’ – exacerbated the alienation girls already experience towards science. (Skelton and Francis, 2009, p. 100)

Jessica Ringrose, also in the British context, argues that current educational policy can be construed as postfeminist in that principles of second wave feminism, such as choice and empowerment, are being used to support neoliberal educational reform (Ringrose, 2007). It is important to note here that the study of gender differences in academic achievement is more prevalent in the United Kingdom. Whereas in the United States educational researchers tend to focus on the racial achievement gap, in Great Britain, where the National Curriculum with a common curriculum for both sexes was not formalized until 1988, the gender achievement gap is

paramount (Ringrose, 2007). In part, Ringrose's argument centers on how more resources are being directed to boys because the success of girls in school is taken to imply the failure of boys. Relevant to my purpose here is her assertion that "Recent media attention has shifted even greater emphasis on to girls' educational performance as evidence that individual success is attainable and educational policies are working at school" (Ringrose, 2007, p. 474).

Ringrose goes on to argue that following the close tracking of test scores and the constant comparison of scores between the genders produces "a dominant educational narrative that gender equity has been attained or even surpassed" (Ringrose, 2007, p. 478). A similar phenomena is happening in the United States where it is widely understood that girls graduate from high school and attend college at a higher rate than boys, implying that girls need no extra resources in school and further implying a broader sense of gender equity in the society overall. Interestingly while girls' success is seen as an exemplar of their individual merit, boys' failures are often read as a problem stemming from the "feminization" of education -- a classroom construct that favors "girl behaviors" such as sitting still and listening and an over-representation of female teachers.

In the American context there is research regarding postfeminism and its impact at the higher education level (Love & Helmbrecht, 2007; Weber, 2010), but little discussion in the realm of Kindergarten – 12th grade education. In the late 1990s there was some research conducted on pre-service teachers and their understanding (and interest) in issues of gender equity (Campbell & Sanders, 1997; Lundeberg, 1997). In this research no reason is suggested for the lack of teacher training in the area of gender equity in the classroom. However Lundeberg's article cites research stating that students are more likely to believe and internalize information that is in line

with their personal experience. She also notes that some students claimed not to have noticed or experienced gender bias in their pre-college education. Likewise, in her study no students had been exposed in their pre-college education to coursework focusing on gender equity. The absence of discussion around gender equity in teacher education is indicative of a postfeminist ideology at work.

Postfeminism in education then follows the same logic as postfeminism in the labor market – since barriers have been removed by legislation such as Title IX, and since gender issues have already been discussed and remedied (following influential reports like *How Schools Shortchange Girls* in 1992) - girls are free (and expected) to achieve in school at any level they *choose*. Postfeminism in education policy manifests itself in the absence of any reference to gender or gender issues.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have shown the connections between neoliberalism, widely critiqued for its pervasive presence in U.S. educational reform today, and postfeminism, and argued that understanding how postfeminism works as an ideology to obscure gender inequity is useful in the critique of education policies as well as in examining the experiences of girls in school. I have also reviewed second and third wave feminism in an effort to clarify the distinctions between these feminist movements and postfeminism.

In my current interaction with feminism in various media sources and on blogs, there is no talk of “waves.” Young women today are struggling not with the choice to align themselves with

second or third wave feminism, but rather to determine whether they identify as feminists at all. This has lead public and popular figures, such as singer Beyonce, actor Emma Watson and singer Taylor Swift, to assert that they are feminists and others, such as President and CEO of Yahoo, Melissa Mayer and singer Katy Perry, to assert they are not. It is a critical time in the history of feminism - as a movement, ideology and even as a word. My research is grounded in feminist theory and my belief that gender is a crucial lens through which to view and interpret discourse. The title of my dissertation, *Middle School Girls in Postfeminist Times*, suggests that these are postfeminist times -- a time in which gender equity is assumed, making it difficult to recognize inequity and its sources. I have argued here that postfeminism is an equally important lens for understanding discourse in schools. It is particularly valuable to me for its potential to shed light on the vital connection between the language of equity and equitable actions and policies.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

Ever since I began work as a museum educator in the mid-1990s I have enjoyed spending time in schools. My first job at the museum was collaborating with all the teachers at one elementary school. Later I managed several museum school partnerships and vetted schools that wanted to work with the museum. Regardless of the position I held, visiting and sometimes teaching at schools was part of my job. At first glance schools appear chaotic and noisy, but they are filled with a million content-rich small moments that I find compelling, informative and even entertaining. Moments like: being in an art class in a high school in Bay Ridge watching a slight underclass student selling snacks out of her book bag to her classmates; being in an elementary school in Mill Basin one March and hearing, as part of a Women's History Month celebration, 90 squeaky third grade voices singing "I am woman, hear me roar," or being in a middle school in Park Slope on the day the students receive their high school acceptance letters and watching groups of friends dissolve in tears, comforting one another over the results. My task as a museum educator with my own partner school and then later as a school programs manager was to act as an amateur cultural anthropologist. I met with teachers, administrators and sometimes students to get a sense of the school in order to determine if the school and the museum's program were a good fit for collaboration. After some practice, I became good at homing in on school culture fairly quickly. I understood how to make teachers comfortable enough to invite me into their classrooms. I knew how to sit in the back of the room and get kids to talk to me informally. I was aware of what was hanging on the walls of the hallways and what was missing. I understood what that could tell me about teachers' perception of their students. I spent

years refining these skills and when it came time for my research project I wanted to put them to good use. To me, schools are rich and informative research sites.

Ethnography

My research design is an ethnographic case study (Buroway, 1998) conducted at an urban, public middle school. Because most research on gender and schooling that highlights the success of girls is based on their scores on standardized tests and their high school graduation and college matriculation rates (Buchmann & DiPrete, 2006), research into the actual experiences of girls in school is lacking, and necessary. I argue that observations of student interactions in the classroom, as well as interactions between students and teachers, reveals basic information about gender and gender relations and also serves to respond to earlier research on gender in the classroom (AAUW, 1992; Sadker & Sadker, 1994; Sadker & Zittleman, 2009). In an article about extended case study, Buroway (1998) writes that ethnographers should write “accounts of real events, struggles, and dramas that took place over space and time” (p. 5). This is what I sought to do as an ethnographer in the school setting. Additionally, through this project I seek to understand the experience of girls in middle school specifically in the context of postfeminism. As described in Chapter Two, postfeminist ideology, working in concert with neoliberalism, emphasizes the notion that, because of anti-discriminatory legislation and the dominant narrative of competition, individuality and meritocracy in schools, feminism and advocacy for girls and women is no longer needed. As Buroway asserts: “The extended case method...deploys a different comparative strategy, *tracing the source of small difference to external forces*” (Buroway, 1998, p. 19, italics in the original). I am also aligned with critical ethnographers who concern themselves with “unmasking dominant social constructions and the interests they

represent, studying society with the goal of transforming it, and freeing individuals from sources of domination and repression” (Anderson, 1989, p. 254).

These observations also provide baseline information about what has changed in the classroom since the American Association of University Women published their landmark report *How Schools Shortchange Girls* in 1992. Their research relied on a complex observation instrument that allowed them to measure the number of times girls were called on and to quantify the amount of attention girls received in the classroom. Initially I assumed I could utilize similar methods to guide my research into girls’ experiences in the classroom. However, during my pilot study I quickly realized that great differences in contemporary pedagogy, particularly in middle school, made it impossible and unnecessary to use these tools. Middle school students work in small groups, do project-based learning, have individual work time in the classroom, compare notes and respond to the work of their peers. As such it is often difficult to tell in a classroom whose voice is being represented. I argue that the use of this pedagogy in middle school classrooms eliminates the possibility of recording how often a girl is called on in the classroom and how much attention she is paid by the teacher. Ethnographic observation presents a much broader and richer picture of the girls’ experience in the school. As Rosalie Rolón-Dow explains of her research on schooling and identity for Puerto Rican middle school girls:

Ethnographic methods allowed for an exploration of the ways that descriptions, actions, and relational encounters within a school site culturally produced and valued or disparaged images and representations of Puerto Rican girls. (Rolón-Dow, 2004, p. 9)

The goal of this research project is similar -- to explore the ways that discourse, action and interaction among students, students and teachers, and students and the school contribute to the

experience of middle school girls. In writing about their research methods for a longitudinal study of boys and girls in Australia from high school through young adulthood, Lyn Yates and Julie McLeod note the danger of examining discourse and identity construction and creating a “flat picture of the individual life being made, a picture in which a person was a cipher of discourse, a one-dimensional figure on whom social messages were writ” (McLeod & Yates, 2006, p. 31). They go on to argue against “generalized ‘identity construction’” in favor of research that explores “how the social is mediated and encountered subjectively” (McLeod & Yates, 2006, p. 31). McLeod and Yates suggest that the researcher explore “the range of influences, practices, experiences and relations that combine to produce a young person and young people” (McLeod & Yates, 2006, p. 38). Ethnography, through a combination of what Clifford Geertz (1973) refers to as “thick description” of the school site, participant observation in the school environment and interviews with informants including students and teachers, creates the opportunity to see how meaning is made by individuals each day.

My research also draws on Dorothy E. Smith’s methodology of institutional ethnography. Smith explains the process of institutional ethnography in this way: “it begins with some issues, concerns, or problems that are real for people and that are situated in their relationships to an institutional order” (Smith, 2005, p. 32). Instead of entering the research site with an issue or problem in mind, I entered the site intent on close observation and careful listening to locate the concerns of middle school girls and their teachers. Smith goes on to explain that the concerns of the research participants “are explicated by the researcher in talking with them and thus set the direction of inquiry” (Smith, 2005, p. 32). Finally Smith argues that this research must be conducted “in the local actualities of people’s lives” (Smith, 2005, p. 25). Being on the school

site and conducting participant-observation of middle school girls allowed my research to be generative, based on the observed experiences and stated concerns of the participants.

Majorie DeVault, who uses institutional ethnography as a methodology to research people at work, defines it in this way: “combining theory and method, institutional ethnography emphasizes connections among the sites and situations of everyday life, management/professional practice, and policymaking, considered from people’s locations in everyday life” (DeVault, 2008, p. 4). In the case of my research the “sites and situations” are the school and the experience of schooling, with a focus on making meaning of gender and gender relations for middle school girls and their teachers. Specifically this project looks at the connections between girls and the institution of school (including interactions with teachers and teacher attitudes and ideas about gender). This study follows in a tradition of research that examines the experience of girls in school in the United States (Sadker & Sadker, 1994; Orenstein, 1995; Sarroub, 2005; Sadker & Zittleman, 2009). Unlike much of the research that has gone before, however, this project not only examines the ways in which girls are treated in school by peers, faculty and administration, but also records how girls think, feel and act in reaction to their experiences in school.

Feminist research practice

In their introduction to a special issue of the journal *Discourse* on research in gender and education, the editors note that there is a relationship between research focused on gender and feminist theory. They argue “educational research on gender has been substantially influenced by, and contributed to, the various forms of feminist theorizing that have enjoyed wide acclaim

or paradigmatic dominance in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century” (Dillabough, McLeod & Mills, 2008, p. 301). Still, a researcher examining gender and education need not employ feminist theory nor be a feminist. In the case of this research, however, I am a feminist drawing on feminist theory.

While in the twenty-first century it can be difficult to find a single definition of feminism or feminist, I agree with Patti Lather’s definition when she writes broadly of feminism saying “through the questions that feminism poses and the absences it locates, feminism argues the centrality of gender in the shaping of our consciousness, skills and institutions as well as in the distribution of power and privilege” (Lather, 1991, p. 71). Ideas and definitions of gender can also be problematic. My position on these issues is explained in Chapter Two. In terms of my research interest and the work that has led me to look at girls’ experiences in schools, my ideological goal is aligned with Lather’s statement, “the overt ideological goal of feminist research in the human sciences is to correct both the *invisibility* and *distortion* of female experience in ways relevant to ending women’s unequal social position” (Lather, 1991, p. 71, italics in the original). For me, ethnographic research that begins from the issues and concerns of the individual and allows those issues and concerns to guide the inquiry is feminist research practice.

As mentioned above, I am concerned with examining the experiences of middle school girls and their teachers in the contemporary context of postfeminist ideology. However, I did not expect my research participants to necessarily be aware of postfeminist arguments or ideas. In fact, through informal interviews with teachers and based on my pilot study, I realized it is unlikely

that most middle school girls will have a conscious understanding of feminism, let alone the tenets of postfeminism and its possible impact on their lives. Following Saba Mahmood, I also recognize that the “normative political subject of poststructuralist feminist theory often remains a liberatory one, whose agency is conceptualized on the binary model of subordination and subversion” (2005, p. 14). I agree with Mahmood’s argument that limiting feminist research to examining only two modes of action within a participants’ experience “elides dimensions of human action whose ethical and political status does not map onto the logic of repression and resistance” (2005, p. 14). That is, even in the absence of actions that can clearly be marked as resistance against or complicity with either feminism or postfeminism, these ideologies are useful in guiding my analysis of actions, interactions and discourse among middle school girls and their teachers in school.

Reflexivity

My subjectivity as the researcher in this study is shaped by several factors including: my own gender identification as a woman, my ideological position as a feminist, and my work as an art educator in several different contexts with students from Kindergarten through graduate school. Likewise I am a parent of a son and a daughter and have observed how ideas around gender are played out and develop with my own children and their friends. My own experience of gender and gender relations as a white middle class girl growing up in a suburb of a small mid-Atlantic city was fairly uneventful up through college, leading me to believe that gender issues would never affect my ability to do or be anything I aspired to. This idea was challenged when I became a mother in my early 30s and saw the impact on my professional life. It was challenged

again when my daughter was born and I began to see how ideas about gender identity and gender relations were being presented to her as early as infancy.

All of these experiences inform the knowledge that I bring to the study, but I worked to use this knowledge as a reference point from which I expanded out as I learned about the specific experiences of the students and teachers I met at my research site. As Wendy Luttrell writes:

I think of being reflexive as an exercise in sustaining multiple and sometimes opposing emotions, keeping alive contradictory ways of theorizing the world, and seeking compatibility, not necessarily consensus. (Luttrell, 2009, p. 273)

I recognize that the girls who are participants in my research are urban, working and middle class and racially diverse. Some are recent immigrants and have lives that are significantly different from my own and my experience of growing up, and being an educator and mother. I have sought compatibility, not consensus, between their lives and my own experiences as I developed my research theories.

Methods: participant observation, focus groups and interviews.

Participant observation and descriptive field notes

A critical strategy in ethnographic research is participant observation. I utilized participant observation believing it would be the most useful method for understanding girls' experiences and their meaning-making process. By observing their language and actions in the school context, I was able to make connections between individuals and the institution of school. In participant observation the researcher immerses him/herself in the research site with their research participants in order to "grasp what [the research participants] experience as meaningful

and important” (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw, 2011, p. 3). This method involves the researcher “being with other people to see how they respond to events as they happen and experiencing for oneself these events and the circumstances that gave rise to them” (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw, 2011, p. 3). As such, description and interpretation can happen simultaneously. A key strategy in participant observation for me was taking descriptive field notes. I carried a notebook with me and kept it out and visible at all times while at I was at Fort Defiance Middle School (FDMS). I wrote in the notebook constantly - writing descriptions of the classroom when students were reading silently or taking tests. I wanted the students and teachers to become accustomed to seeing me writing and not worry if I was writing about them or what they had just done or said. These notes not only captured what was happening but my interpretation of what was happening - how it related to other events or comments that I had witnessed that day or on other days. Emerson, Fretz and Shaw (2011) note that:

Descriptive field notes,...are products of active processes of interpretation and sense-making that frame or structure not only what is written but also how it is written.

Description, then, relies on interpretive/constructive processes that can give different field notes distinctive shapes and feel. (p. 9)

The only exception to the constant writing in my notebook was in the cafeteria. While in the cafeteria I put my notebook and pencil away and just watched, listened and chatted with the students and paraprofessionals whose job it was to police the students at lunch. As lunch was one of the few times the students could relax away from the structure of class and teachers, I was anxious to not look like I was taking notes on their language and behavior. I would, however, write up what I had observed during lunch hour directly afterwards.

Interviews and focus groups

In addition to engaging in participant observation, I interviewed teachers, male and female, and girls at FDMS and conducted three focus groups with the girls. I intentionally did not conduct my first interviews with teachers or focus group with girls until after I had spent three months observing at FDMS. Interviews with the girls were conducted last, at the very end of the school year. My questions for teachers were a combination of open-ended questions such as “how would you characterize gender relations at FDMS” and content specific questions like “have you noticed non-participating girls in your classroom and what do you think is going on with them.” I found it very advantageous when interviewing teachers to have witnessed particular events or class sessions and to be familiar with most of the students by name prior to our interview. As such teachers could easily reference certain students as examples or ask me to recall certain moments in class and explicate for me what they believed to have been happening at that time. Many classrooms at FDMS had two teachers. In being able to interview both teachers from the same classroom I was better able to triangulate data on students in those classrooms and on classroom-based events. I conducted interviews with 12 teachers. This included a long-term substitute teacher who was in the school all year but taught in different classrooms depending on where coverage was needed.

Before conducting my first focus group with girls from FDMS I did a pilot focus group with middle school girls from another school in the same school district. I wanted to test my questions and activities to see where I needed to make revisions (Maxwell, 1996). For the pilot group, held at one of the girls’ homes, I brought pizza and soda and a variety of media images including

reproductions of posters from the New York City Girls Project “I am A Girl” campaign which was in subway cars at the time, and a YouTube video for pop singer Beyonce’s song “If I were a Boy” in which she imagines how her life would be different as a boy. The song includes lyrics such as “I’d get out of bed in the morning, throw on what I wanted and go” and “drink beer with the guys and chase after girls, I’d kick it with who I wanted and never be confronted for it, ‘cause they’d stick up for me” (Jean & Gad, 2008). The song implies, therefore, that life as a boy would be easier. The pilot study helped me realize that sixth grade girls are not accustomed to talking about gender or gender issues critically. It was also my introduction to girls’ latent narrative on gender equity. Though they struggled to discuss gender issues or equity, girls still shared their opinion that their school was an equitable place. The pilot focus group was revelatory and caused me to completely rethink the structure of the focus groups I had planned to conduct at FDMS. Rather than work with mass media images that critiqued gender relations or equity, I devised a series of activities that related directly to the girls’ experiences at FDMS, which I was familiar with by that time.

Interviews with girls were conducted at the end of the school year in May. This allowed the girls to be reflective about their year’s experience at FDMS. Both the girls and I could draw on specific incidents and individuals in our conversation. The sixth grade girls were more confident in their roles as middle school students and had a greater understanding of how FDMS functioned socially. My interviews with teachers and girls and focus groups with girls then followed Emerson, Fretz and Shaw’s (2011) advice that “field researchers would be well advised to interview people specifically about interactions and occasions, both those they have observed indirectly and those that occurred out of their presence” (p. 263). While I did have an interview

guide, I encouraged the girls to respond in stories and examples rather than think of strict “answers” to the questions. This is in keeping with Buroway’s suggestion “instead of foisting the standardized interview on respondents, the interviewer allows respondents to tell their own story, to offer their own ‘narrative’” (Buroway, 1998, p. 13).

Data Collection

Setting

My research took place in a small urban middle school in Brooklyn, New York -- Fort Defiance Middle School (FDMS) from October 2013 – May 2014. FDMS is housed on one floor of a very large red brick school building built around 1910. The building takes up an entire block with the back of it opening up onto a large concrete yard empty but for two basketball hoops surrounded by a chain link fence. In one corner of the yard is a small playground with brightly colored climbing equipment used by the elementary school that shares the building, Pilar Montero Elementary School. Across from the playground are a series of low wooden boxes in which students from the elementary school grow herbs and vegetables. One half of the concrete yard is buttressed up against a baseball field, used by the gym classes and also by Brooklyn little league teams. Just beyond that is a busy highway that splits the once united Brooklyn neighborhood. The other half of the concrete yard backs up onto an entrance to the same highway.

Pilar Montero Elementary School (PMES), serves students in Kindergarten through fifth grade and is located on the first three floors of the building. PMES has the New York City Department of Education status of being “unzoned,” meaning in this case that entry is determined by lottery. Because the school has a reputation for being progressive and diverse, the lottery only admits a

small percentage of its applicants each year with preference being given to siblings of students who currently attend or attended the school and students who reside in the district. The co-director of the middle and high school was a founding parent and teacher at the elementary school and also founded the middle school.

On the top floor of the building is Fort Defiance High School (FDHS). This small school has a reputation among the students of the middle school and their families for being a good school largely because it has a fairly high graduation rate (86%) and boasts an 100% college acceptance rate. The high school, however, is not sought after by the upper-middle and upper-class parents in the district. The middle school had been in existence for 11 years when I conducted my study. The high school was founded six years ago. The high school is a source of contention for some of the middle school teachers who believe that because the students will automatically be accepted to FDHS, they are not motivated to work hard and get good grades in middle school. One teacher told me that the middle school used to be more competitive with a better reputation before the high school was created because the students went on to well-known high schools instead of just going upstairs.

Inside the building, the elementary school is bright and cheery with yellow walls and student work and art work everywhere. The school building has tall windows and the classrooms are well-lit. On the middle school floor, the top half of the walls are painted beige with dark brown stone covering the bottom half. The classroom doors are also dark brown. Though there are ten foot tall windows in many classrooms, the shades are always drawn tightly so that no natural light enters the classroom. In the hallways there is little student work on display. The work that

is on the walls consists of examples of stellar science projects or essays. The work is all done on standard 8 1/2 x 11 inch paper which looks small against the walls of the hallway. In one of the corridors the floor has buckled up and cracked and is being held down with duct tape. One of the corridors has double rows of lockers lining the hallways. There are not enough lockers for every student in the middle and high school, so getting assigned a locker is a reward to students who have high HOWLs percentages (a behavioral point system explained in detail below). The lockers can be taken away if the HOWLs percentage drops. Most of the lockers are empty and the students are forced to carry all of their books in their backpacks along with their coats (and umbrellas, scooters, skateboards, if they have them) all day long.

Student demographics

FDMS is a small school. During the 2013-14 school year when I conducted my research 296 students attended the school - approximately 100 students in each grade sixth through eighth (New York City Department of Education, 2014). It is important to include information about student demographics, as diversity at the school, as well as the large special needs population, was commented on constantly by the teachers and administrators. Many teachers said that the diversity of the school was attractive to them. Likewise the school prides itself on diversity. On its website the first sentence about the school states that FDMS is diverse. In reality, statistics show that the school's population is 53% Latino, 35% African-American, 9% white, 1% Asian, and 1% other (New York City Department of Education, 2014). Special needs students comprise 40% of the school's population (New York City Department of Education, 2014). Finally, 66% of the school's population is eligible for free lunch (New York City Department of Education, 2014). Free lunch is an indicator of how many students in the school are living at or below the

poverty line. In our conversation about the inception of the school, Sofia, the co-founder and co-director, told me:

I still think diversity has a great value, but I think that my understanding of what was gained and lost through the desegregation of our schools and the re-segregation of our schools is more complicated than I understood at that time [when she was starting the school]. (Interview, 5/22/14)

She went on to say that she wanted to start a school that would be “*heterogeneous economically, ethnically and academically where kids would actually still read real books and have authentic kinds of writing assignments*” (Interview, 5/22/14). Explaining why a diverse range of families sought out Pilar Montero Elementary School (PMES) but not FDMS, Sofia explained that “*it turns out that not all of these same people who wanted this very progressive diverse elementary school actually wanted a progressive diverse middle school*” (Interview, 5/22/14). She further said that the parental desire for a more traditional, more homogenous middle school “*broke down pretty early on ...along the color line. Because at the very beginning middle class African-American families and Latino families were still coming here but the white ones were not*” (Interview, 5/22/14). She concluded by stating “*So there are a lot of ways in which this desire to be a diverse school has not been realized. And I’m thinking about it a lot, about how much it mattered or whether I should have pursued it or if I could have pursued it differently*” (Interview, 5/22/14). Information about the gender breakdown at the school is not collected by the New York City Department of Education and reported in either the school’s *Quality Review* or the *Progress Report* documents, but it is understood, and verified by the co-founder and the Assistant Principal, that there are more boys than girls at the school.

In terms of academics, 15% of the students met state standards on the State English test (New York City Department of Education, 2014). The city average is 27% and the average for the district in which FDMS is situated is 38% (New York City Department of Education, 2014). Only 5% of the students met state standards on the State Math test (New York City Department of Education, 2014). The city average for this test is 29% and the district average is 35% (New York City Department of Education, 2014). Related to academic performance is where FDMS students go to high school. Forty-four percent attend FDHS located on the floor above the middle school (New York City Department of Education, 2014). Several teachers commented to me that having a high school upstairs was de-motivating academically for the students. That is, if there was not a fall back high school that had a good graduation rate that FDMS students could automatically feed into perhaps they would work harder and strive to attend specialized high schools like Brooklyn Technical High School or even an arts high school like La Guardia High School for the Performing Arts.

Teachers and administrators

The teachers at FDMS were not much more racially diverse than the student body. Over 60% of the faculty was white. Interestingly, eight of the twelve teachers I interviewed at FDMS had not intended to become middle school teachers, but were certified in either sixth through twelfth grade or seventh through twelfth grade with the original desire to be a high school teacher. There were a smaller number of first through sixth grade certified teachers teaching in the sixth grade. When I asked the teachers what drew them to FDMS as a teacher many responded with comments that reflected their interest in the high school. They spoke of the exemption in the high school from taking the Regents exams. In the middle school, students were required to take

all state exams. As noted above, teachers likewise spoke of how much they appreciated the diversity of the school. The teachers who participated in my study represented a range of subject areas: math, science, English Language Arts, social studies, art. They also represented a range of teacher experience. One of the teachers who participated in the study had just started teaching that year. Another teacher was in his 24th year of teaching. The bulk of the teachers' experience ranged from 3 – 13 years. In terms of teacher gender, more male teachers (7) were interviewed than female (5). The racial breakdown was four African-American teachers, six white teachers and two Asian-American teachers. Interestingly, all of the female teachers who participated in the research study were people of color and all but one of the male teachers were white. Both the Assistant Principal (AP) and the Director of Culture and Character (DCC) had been teachers at the school before moving into administrative roles and had eight and nine years of teaching experience respectively. The AP was a white woman and the DCC was an African-American man.

Curriculum

FDMS is an Expeditionary Learning school and is affiliated with a national network of schools. Expeditionary Learning is an organization that partners with schools and primarily offers professional development for teachers. The organization works with 160 schools in 33 states. Expeditionary Learning means that teachers create integrated curriculum units that require students to go on “expeditions” outside of the school to gather primary source evidence. While I was there, sixth grade students did an expedition on imminent domain focusing on the controversy surrounding the razing of the Brooklyn train yards to build the Barclay’s Center, a sports arena and music venue; seventh graders did a graphic novel expedition in English

Language Arts writing and illustrating a graphic novel based on their own stories. Expeditions are carried out in each grade once or twice a year. They are labor intensive for both the teachers and the students. When the students are not engaged in an expedition the curriculum is similar to that of other middle schools in the district. Sofia, the co-founder and co-director of FDMS told me that an impetus for starting the school was in part because “*there were no progressive middle schools in this district*” and that she was “*very excited about the notion of project-based learning*” (Interview, 5/22/14). Most of the classes follow an Integrated Co-Teaching (ICT) model. In this model, used throughout the New York City Department of Education, students with special needs attend classes with their peers in general education. The classroom has two teachers -- the subject area teacher and a special education teacher. Co-teaching is an important pedagogical belief espoused by the school.

The socio-emotional curriculum is a critical part of the school’s philosophy. In discussing her goals for the school when she co-founded it Sofia said she wanted to “*marry challenging academics with the social emotional curriculum*” (Interview, 5/22/14). She explained to me that “*this is a foundational principle of the school, that you look at the whole kid ... there are ways to attend to the social and emotional part of the child and the academic part, but to do it in tandem*” (Interview, 5/22/14). This curriculum is delivered to students in a variety of ways. The primary form is through a daily advisory period called “Crew.” Crew serves many functions at the school. Because it acts like a homeroom, any messages that need to be shared with the students or any paperwork they need to do happens in Crew. For example, when the school was sponsoring a snow-boarding field trip, all communication and forms regarding that trip were dealt with in Crew. Students received their progress reports and report cards in Crew. The Crew

leaders, there were two per class, also acted as the primary adult contact for the students. Crew leaders were supposed to be the adults that know the students best. "Circles," a discussion format, in which pertinent social issues could be discussed, as well as other team-building activities happened in Crew. Many of the activities were related to the four primary ideals of the school: courage, kindness, community and perseverance. Though there was a weekly schedule that included circles, goal-setting for the students and independent reading, there was no set curriculum for Crew. I observed a sixth grade Crew once a week and saw a variety of activities take place including game playing, personality test taking and making snowflakes for decorating the classroom. Crew is therefore up to the discretion of the Crew leaders and can be based on issues with which their particular students are dealing.

The school has four primary values -- courage, kindness, community and perseverance -- which are reinforced in a number of ways. The values are discussed in classes throughout the day and are evident in bulletin board displays in the hallways. The students write about them in English Language Arts and they draw images of what they might look like in Crew. The value of kindness, for example, is emphasized through bulletin boards in the hallway labeled "Acts of Kindness" on which students demonstrating kindness are celebrated by having their kind act recorded on 3x5 notecards and posted. The school also holds "town hall" meetings that often focus on one or more of these ideals as well as other topics including bullying. Occasionally at a town hall meeting students are rewarded for demonstrating these values by receiving rubber bracelets with the particular value they exhibited stamped on them. While the socio-emotional curriculum felt pervasive with the bulletin boards, daily class sessions and town hall meetings, Sofia was adamant that it go hand in hand with challenging academics. She told me "*I mean this*

is not a therapeutic environment so if you just have great social emotional curriculum and no cognitive demand ... that's some horrible form of racism or something, I don't know what it is, but it's not good' (Interview, 5/22/14).

Discipline

The primary discipline strategy at the school is related to the socio-emotional curriculum. The strategy involves rewarding or punishing students with a points system. This system is referred to as Habits of Work and Learning (HOWLs). There is one set of values called Responsibility for Learning and another set called Responsibility for Community. Some teachers also regularly use this language when disciplining students in class letting them know when they are being disrespectful to the learning community. Students' HOWLs percentage is recorded and appears on their report card. The HOWLs percentage is also shared fairly frequently with students' families. Teachers are constantly subtracting points during every class period. Students begin each period of the day with all of their points. Points are subtracted for being late, not having homework, talking, not being prepared and other offenses. Students' points are supposed to be entered into a computer system that calculates the student averages on a regular basis.

Maintenance of HOWLs was sometimes overwhelming to teachers who did not see it as a priority. Students cannot officially pass a class without a HOWLs percentage of 90 or above. Many of the teachers in the middle school do not believe that the HOWLs system is effective in correcting behavior. A few teachers told me that HOWLs revolutionized discipline in the high school, which uses the same system, but that it is not as useful in the middle school. Teachers had various theories as to why, including that middle school students simply are not mature enough to self-correct their behavior based on an abstract point system. Other teachers believed

that the high school students understood they had more at stake in terms of their grades and wanting to graduate and go to college, whereas the middle school students were not as concerned with their grades.

The other main discipline strategy is detention. Detention occurs daily at recess. Students are told in Crew if they have received detention for that day. Typically students first lose HOWLs points for off task behavior, and if that doesn't correct the behavior they are given detention. When students are given a detention they are told which FDMS value they are in violation of (e.g. 1.2 not respecting your learning community). At detention students were required to write down a plan of action to insure that they did not misbehave again. Detention only lasted 20 minutes and as such was not considered much of a punishment by the students. Though I did not witness this practice, restorative justice meetings were also a tenet of the disciplinary system. This involved students who were part of a disciplinary action of some kind attending a mediated meeting to address the issue or action and resolve any outstanding disputes. A few students at the school were also frequently suspended.

Despite the various systems in place, behavior especially in the seventh and eighth grade was a major concern. Students roam the halls during class time often sticking their head into other classrooms and yelling into them. There are some classes where the students are rarely in their seats and there are very few classes that are ever silent for any amount of time. One seventh grade teacher, with excellent classroom management skills, told me after a particularly frustrating class that she does the best she can within the "constraints of FDMS" - meaning the accepted disciplinary strategies. She explained to me that she feels that the school is too

“kumbayah” and went on to clarify that she believes the school has “Park Slope values” but “Bed-Stuy kids” (Field notes, 10/23/13). In other words the school is embracing a white middle class set of educational values for socio-economically disadvantaged students of color. She believed it was unlikely that this formula could be successful. The lack of accountability for discipline problems was a concern for many teachers in the school.

Atmosphere

The hallways are loud between classes and the students are very physical with one another as they pass each other. The students typically walk in groups of two or three, though some students travel the hallways alone. Boys can often be seen picking up and carrying girls down the hall. Some boys and girls approach each other in the hallway and hug in a perfunctory manner as two adults who are friends might greet each other when they meet up. Boys greet each other with different handshake rituals which I learn may sometimes be gang related. Girls are more likely to hug or kiss each other’s cheeks. The students who are vying for more attention run through the halls knocking people over and yelling. Because the school is small - one floor in a T-formation with three corridors - and the students have three minutes to change classes, there is plenty of time to run after a friend or someone you want to talk to or into another classroom before reporting to the next assigned class. Some teachers also change rooms so they can be seen in the hallways as well. On one of my first weeks at the school, a very tall female teacher passed me in the hallway and warned me to “be careful in the hall.” I laughed but she was serious. There are a number of school security guards who work in the building and there is always one standing outside the main office at FDMS as the students change classes.

Data Sources

In order to reduce the risk of “systematic biases” or the “limitations of a specific method,” three data sources were used in this study: participant observation, focus groups and interviews (Maxwell, 1996, p.75).

Participant observation: pencils and gum

My typical week at FDMS involved observing at the school from 9 am until 2 or 3 pm three days a week. A fourth day was available during the second half of the year for interview appointments. I spent a day each week observing each grade. It helped me to get the feeling of the grade by spending the whole day with them and it also created a fixed schedule so the teachers and students knew when to expect me. I believed that by keeping regular hours I would more readily start to blend in as a fixture at FDMS. My role in each classroom was dependent on the teacher. Some teachers let me sit in the back and never spoke to me, shared any material with me or asked me to do anything. I do not believe that this was out of animosity. I had assured the teachers I was totally flexible about my role in the classroom and that it was entirely up to them. I did not feel unwelcome in these classrooms nor did the students in those classrooms react differently to me than in any other classroom. In other classrooms teachers shared handouts with me, explained the lesson plan and didn't seem to mind if I interacted with students or helped out in small ways during independent work time.

In one classroom which I observed two times a week, seventh grade English Language Arts, I was a full-on participant. One of the two teachers in the room constantly involved me in the student activities and forced me into an assistant role by announcing to students before

independent work “any of the *three* teachers in the room can help you.” On other occasions she would assign me to work with certain students or at certain tables to keep kids on task. Being in this bright, orderly and efficiently run space was a highlight of my seventh grade observation day. As I told the teacher, the students were always at their best in her class and I enjoyed being part of their learning experience. Participating in this way also gave me insight into the students’ lives and their attitudes about school. For instance, one afternoon Jade, the teacher, asked me to sit with Rafael and Tomas and help them finish up their essays. Though I was primarily focused on the girls at the school, I knew both Rafael and Tomas and had talked to them in the cafeteria and given them pencils or gum in any number of other classes. Neither one struck me as a stellar student, nor were they exceptionally disruptive. Based on my observation of them in class and our few conversations, they seemed to be very similar students. As I sat down to review their essays with them, one of the boys asked me what I was doing in the school. I told him I was conducting research for my Ph.D. Rafael immediately said “oh.” Tomas looked at us both and asked: “what’s that?” Rafael then explained to him that you received your Ph.D. after completing many years of graduate school which was after college. Later, as the period was ending, I asked both boys what their plan was for finishing their work. Rafael said he had a laptop at home and so could easily finish by the next day. Tomas said he had no computer at home, but since he had been absent a few days in the past week he thought he would get extra time to finish. Beyond that, he didn’t have much of a plan (Field notes, 2/12/14). This incident illustrates the importance of the participatory element of participant observation. Significant differences in the lives of these two boys were revealed in just a couple of quick exchanges. In situations in which the teacher did not invite me to participate directly with the students, I found it helpful to maintain a steady supply of pencils and gum. I could always be counted on to

provide either of these two items to any student who asked which was a good strategy for meeting and talking to a range of students in the classroom.

Students

My primary data source were the girls at the school. Girls in every grade -- sixth, seventh and eighth -- were observed in formal and informal spaces in the school, but only sixth and seventh grade girls participated in interviews or focus groups (see *Limitations of this Study* section in this chapter). Teacher consent had determined which classes, and therefore which girls, I was to become most familiar with, and focus group and interview participants reflect that network. However, spending time in the library and cafeteria gave me a chance to interact with other girls. Likewise, once I started the Lunchtime Art Club I came into contact with a network of girls I had not had the opportunity to meet in the classroom and was able to invite them to participate in interviews. In my first conversations with Sofia, the co-director of the school, I expressed my interest in doing something useful for the school in return for being allowed to conduct my research there. In the winter Sofia mentioned that it would be helpful for me to run a club at lunchtime. Because of the cold and snow the students were often stuck inside at lunch and they needed to be occupied. It took awhile to get the club going. There were many logistical concerns such as space, supplies and the issue of me, not having certification, being alone with the students. Finally, Lunchtime Art Club began in March. It ran once a week in a classroom at lunch from March until May. In May we had a pizza party and an “exhibition” of student work on one of the bulletin boards in the hallway. The club was open to anyone. Attendance at the lunch club varied, but there was always a core group of five seventh grade girls who participated.

Student focus groups

A total of 17 girls participated in three focus groups. These girls were a mixture of sixth and seventh grade girls. Focus groups were held in a classroom after school from approximately 3 – 5 pm. One limitation of the focus groups was that the first two were held in January and February. On both occasions bad weather reduced the number of student participants. I provided pizza and soda for the girls at the outset of the focus groups. Girls were asked to choose their own pseudonyms for both the focus groups and the interviews. Four focus group participants were also interviewed.

Because of my experience with my pilot focus group, my approach to the focus groups with FDMS girls was very structured. I felt that the girls were less likely to be able to talk about gender in a completely open-ended situation and instead needed a framework that created the opportunity to dialogue with other girls. This framework was repeated in every session. Each session began with the girls eating pizza and socializing while I set up. Then, I introduced an “ice-breaker” activity. I assumed that the girls would know each other as the school is fairly small, but I did this activity because it was fun, a chance to move around after a long day at school and just in case the girls were feeling anxious with each other. After the ice-breaker we spent the rest of the session doing three activities I had designed: “Group Chat,” “Tableau” and “Alien Invasion.” For Group Chat four pieces of chart paper were hung in the front of the room. Each sheet had a label of either “Pretty Easy,” “O.k.,” “Really hard” or “Not sure.” The girls were each given a post-it note pad and a pen or pencil. I would read a short phrase and ask the girls to copy it onto one of their post-it notes. Once all the girls had finished copying the phrase they were invited to take the post-it note and place it on the chart paper that best described how

they felt about the phrase. For example, the girls copied down “ignoring gossip” and by the placement of their post-it indicated whether it was “pretty easy” to ignore gossip, if they were “o.k.” with ignoring gossip or if they found it “really hard” to ignore gossip. The chart paper was hung close together so that girls had the option to place their post-it notes in between two sheets. In other words, their response could be in between “o.k.” and “really hard.” Once the girls had anonymously placed their post-its, we looked at the results and discussed them as a group. Initially I would open the discussion commenting on the results and posing a question - “I see a lot of people find it difficult to ignore gossip, why is that?” In all three groups however, once the girls understood the protocol they would place their post-its, return to their seats and anxiously begin waving their hands, wanting to share their own perspective, and also what they felt might be going on at the school at large.

“Tableau” was a role-playing activity in which I would read a scenario and volunteers would act it out silently. The other girls could add sound to the scene and if a girl who was not part of the scene felt it should be acted out differently she was free to tap one of the volunteers and take her place to alter the scene. Once the scene had played out we discussed what we had observed happening and why. After I had read a number of scenarios to the girls, they were invited to create their own. The only parameter was that it had to take place at their middle school. Again, girls were excited to participate and especially enjoyed creating their own scenarios which only occasionally included zombies.

The last activity was called “Alien Invasion.” I told the girls that an alien had visited their school and observed them for a week. The alien was an expert in human beings so it understood

most of what was observed. However, there were a few things that it needed explained. I was in possession of the list of things that needed explaining. Girls would then reach into a hat and pull out a slip of paper with a phrase on it like “Everyone is always talking about the ‘drama.’ What is the drama all about?” The girls would then volunteer to explain the meaning or meanings behind the phrase. Like with “Tableau” once my phrases had been discussed girls were invited to write down their own phrases and throw them into the hat to be pulled out for explanation. Typically the girls who had written the phrase wanted to be the ones to explain it, often through telling a personal story. (For a list of all phrases used in focus group activities see *Appendix A.*)

Girls who participated in the focus groups repeatedly approached me at school -- one girl even sent me a note in class -- asking when we could meet again. Because I wanted as many different participants as possible I did not want girls who had been to a focus group already to come again. I thought that once I had completed my initial three focus groups I could hold an “alumni” group for former participants if time allowed. When former participants asked for more meetings I was interested to note that they referred to the session as the “girls’ group” or the “Young Women’s Initiative” mirroring a group that existed for the boys at FDMS, Young Men’s Initiative. Unfortunately I was not able to hold a fourth or alumni group before I left the field. However, months of hearing the girls request another chance to participate in a “girls’ group” had an impact on my thinking about their experience at school.

Student interviews

Student interviews were conducted in May at the end of the school year. In June the school was completely reorganized to allow all passing students in sixth through eighth grade to participate

in expeditions. All failing students were grouped into different classes in an attempt to complete their work and pass their classes. As such the students were not accessible to me in June. A total of eight girls were interviewed - four sixth graders and four seventh graders. As mentioned above four of the girls interviewed had also participated in a focus group. One of the interviewees was a regular participant in the Lunchtime Art Club. The girls were interviewed either at lunchtime in an empty classroom or during Crew, their advisory period, in the library or main office of the school. All of the girls and their guardians granted permission to have the interviews audio-taped. The interview guide asked girls to first share something about themselves that I might not know and then asked a series of open-ended questions about gender issues and gender relations at the school. (For interview guide see *Appendix B*.) The guide also included some specific questions like what the girls thought of the single gender elective courses. The lunchtime interviews lasted about 40 – 45 minutes. However one limitation with the interviews is that Crew is a 35-minute period, slightly shorter than the other class periods. Therefore girls who were taken out of Crew to be interviewed had slightly less time for conversation. As noted above, while there was an interview guide, students were encouraged to think about examples or stories from their own experience in relation to the question. The interviews with individual girls tended to have different foci, though the questions they were asked were largely the same. One girl might spend ten minutes sharing a story of a friendship betrayal while another spent the bulk of her time talking about her relationship with boys in class.

Classroom Observations

The teachers at FDMS were another significant data source. I sought permission to observe in classrooms over the period of a few days in October. Initially I reached out to teachers at a breakfast I provided in the main office. After the first day, I did not actively pursue teacher consent, with one exception, though teachers who had taken consent forms continued to submit them throughout my first two weeks at school. The exception was with two eighth grade English Language Arts (ELA) teachers. I only had science and math teachers agree to allow me to observe in the eighth grade. I wanted a humanities class to see if there was a difference in girls' behavior in different classes, as research suggests. Lorraine and Eva had been recommended to me by the librarian. They taught ELA and the librarian assured me they had an interesting approach in the classroom. Both seemed harried and exasperated when I had seen them in passing during the day. When I entered their classroom to ask if I could observe them Lorraine, who was under a table sorting through books, stood up, walked over to Eva and without looking at me or speaking at all vigorously shook her head, "no." Eva then looked at me and assured me that they "appreciated" what I was doing, but they were "beyond overwhelmed" at this point. I immediately told them that I understood and thanked them for their consideration (Field notes, 10/9/13). Only one other teacher - in his first year, also working with the eighth grade - told me he did not want to participate because he had to focus on getting his class under control.

Twelve teachers agreed to allow me to observe in their classrooms. Because there were typically two teachers in each classroom this translated to eight different classrooms some of which were observed a couple of times a day. One of these teachers unexpectedly resigned halfway through the year. A 13th teacher allowed me to observe her classroom for one elective cycle (10 weeks).

Teachers and Administration Interviews

I conducted interviews with all 12 teachers who allowed me to observe in their classroom. Additionally, I interviewed three administrators: the Assistant Principal (AP) who acted as the primary administrator for the middle school, the co-director and co-founder who largely worked with the high school and the Director of Culture and Character (DCC). I also interviewed four paraprofessionals whom I noticed had very close relationships to students in the classroom. One of these paraprofessionals worked in the sixth grade; two worked in the seventh grade and one worked in the eighth grade. Lastly, I interviewed the school librarian, a white woman who had been at the school for 12 years. The library at FDMS served Pilar Montero Elementary School (PMES), located on the first three floors of the building, FDMS and Fort Defiance High School (FDHS) located on the top floor of the building. The library was located on the fourth floor with FDMS and functioned as a haven for some of the students during the school day giving the librarian an interesting insight into student life at FDMS.

All teacher and administrator interviews were conducted in person, on site at FDMS. The interviews happened during teachers' free periods or before or after school. All but one of the 12 teachers gave permission for me to audio record the interview. The interview guide was the same for all teachers and paraprofessionals. (For interview guide see *Appendix B*.) The guide included questions regarding their history as educators, open-ended and focused questions about gender relations and gender issues at the school. The interview guide was only slightly modified for the administrators to include questions related to overarching school policies. My interview with the co-director and co-founder was more broad-based than the others. She spoke at length about the founding of PMES, FDMS and FDHS and of how certain protocols at FDMS had come

into existence. The interview guide was modified for the school librarian to include questions regarding the students' literary interests and their relationship to the library as an interstitial space at the school. Teacher and administrator interviews tended to last between 45 minutes to an hour.

Data Analysis

Transcribing, Coding, and Analyzing

My handwritten field notes were typed up at the end of each month. The first three months of typed field notes were translated into analytic memos. After that, with the inception of focus groups and student and teacher interviews, field notes were typed up monthly, but memo writing was abandoned until after the research period was completed. Two of the three focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed by me and notes made directly after the focus groups were also typed up. The second focus group suffered from a technical malfunction with audio equipment. I realized this immediately after the group concluded and rushed home to type up notes on the session. The written component of the focus group (Group Chat) was typed up and analyzed immediately after the focus groups sessions as well. Interviews with teachers, administrators and students were audio recorded (with the exception of one teacher who chose not to be audio-recorded). All the adult interviews were transcribed by a professional transcription service, but I transcribed the girls' interviews myself. Besides giving me the opportunity to listen to them again and closely, I felt like there was potential for much to be lost in translation at the hands of an outside transcriber – student and teacher names and references to specific events.

After transcription, the field notes, focus group and interview transcripts were coded. Field notes were coded first. I initially used an open coding method “to identify and formulate any and all ideas, themes or issues they suggest” (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 2011, P. 172). The primary codes came from themes that had emerged from field notes, but secondary themes emerged in the focus group and interview transcript coding process. I then coded or re-coded all the transcripts using a focused coding method (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 2011). I made analytic comments in the margins of the transcripts. These comments were then used to support existing themes or generate new ones. Comments from teacher interviews were entered into an excel spreadsheet document by code along with demographic information about that teacher including gender, years of teaching experience and desire to be a middle school teacher. This allowed me to analyze the teacher comments across demographic information. Eventually themes became chapters. A former colleague at the Graduate Center had advised students to identify our ten “best” stories for help with organizing the dissertation (Perez, personal communication, 2011). There were stories or exchanges that I found myself contemplating over and over. These became my “best” stories in that they often stood as clear exemplars of predominant themes. These stories or exchanges tend to appear at the very beginning or end of the data chapters.

Limitations of this study

Students

Ultimately the students I got to know the best were the sixth and seventh graders. These students were happy to engage with me and some were even anxious to be a part of my project.

Regrettably I was never able to successfully develop similar relationships with the eighth grade girls. As sociologist Mitchell Duneier writes “once researchers select an entry point, the chances

of getting to know all the people or phenomena equally well are limited due to cleavages within groups. Also, becoming close to some people often precludes getting close to others” (Duneier, 2011, p. 3). Duneier refers to this unaccessible population as the “inconvenience sample” (Duneier, 2011). He urges us to question whether members of our inconvenience sample would provide counter arguments to the interpretations we are providing and to share with readers why this sample was so difficult to reach. As a white middle-aged woman who was clearly aligned with the school administration in order to be allowed entrance to the school, the eighth grade girls wanted nothing to do with me. Only three of them ever asked me what I was doing in the school and only a handful of them ever spoke to me casually in the classroom. As a grade they were the most involved with each other socially and as one teacher described the whole grade was like one giant clique. While I could not access this group directly I observed them in class and in the hallways, cafeteria and library. I included questions about them to both the sixth and seventh grade girls and the teachers. In this way I hope to have connected to a certain extent with my “inconvenience sample” (Duneier, 2011).

Race and Class

Initially I wanted to examine and compare the ways in which race and class impacted girls’ experience in middle school. I agree with Patricia Hill Collins (2000) and others who write about the importance of intersectionality when analyzing oppression. That is, to examine the combined impact of gender, race and class. By conducting research at a school that emphasizes and celebrates their diverse student body, I believed it would be possible to bring this mode of analysis to my data. However, as noted above, the school in reality is not truly diverse. Latino and African-American students make up 88% of the school’s population. Likewise 66% of the

students live at or below the poverty line. Additionally I had not imagined the difficulty with speaking to middle school students about their race and class. I was advised to attempt to retrieve this information at the end of a focus group. I made small “exit tickets” for the girls to fill out anonymously. I used the racial and ethnic labels used by the U.S. Census and I asked the girls to self-identify in terms of race and ethnicity. The girls were perplexed by the task of self-identifying. Many asked me what they should write down because they identified as Black and not African-American which was listed on the form. Likewise other girls who presumably were Latina chose to utilize the “other” category filling in “Spanish” as their race. I was not comfortable making assumptions about their race and so I did not use this information.

Likewise, I had been given some suggestions on how to gather information on their socio-economic status. Again, I created an “exit ticket” for the girls to fill out after the focus group. I asked them to identify the neighborhood they lived in -- FDMS is located in an upscale, gentrified neighborhood, but most of its students come from a nearby, economically impoverished neighborhood. I also asked them to share with me their mother and father’s highest level of education by giving them the choice of middle school, high school or college. And, I asked them what their parents’ jobs were. Most of the girls had no idea what their parents’ jobs were. They might know that their mother worked in a hospital, but they didn’t know what she did there. Likewise, they were completely in the dark about their parents’ level of education. Finally, some of the girls had been told not to tell anyone where they lived. Though I was not asking for an address, just a neighborhood name examples of which were on the form, they were reluctant to share it with me. I realize I may have been more successful had I included a sheet similar to the exit ticket with the consent forms that the girls’ families were

asked to sign. Although it is also true that additional paperwork may have been a deterrent for some of the girls and their families in terms of their participation. Lastly, it was uncomfortable after two hours of great conversation and fun activities to force the girls into a demographic category. The girls shared personal information with me because they thought I cared about them as individuals. The mood of the session altered dramatically the first time I brought out these sheets, becoming impersonal. Not having data on the race and class of the students is a missed opportunity and a limitation of this study, but I hope it is something I can address in future research.

“Getting In”: Entry and relationship building at FDMS

In Spring of 2013, I conducted a pilot study for 4 days at a middle school in the same district as FDMS. I had emailed the principal -- whom I had seen speak on a middle school tour that fall - and explained that I was working on my dissertation research proposal and needed to do a pilot study. I admitted that because I hadn't planned on doing the pilot study, part of the appeal of her school was that it was located right next to my daughter's elementary school, thereby allowing me to conduct observations during the school day and pick her up from school on time. I was surprised that she wrote back almost immediately saying it would be no problem and putting me in touch with the Assistant Principal (A.P.) who would meet me in the office on my first day and give me anything I needed. When I arrived on the first day, I briefly met the principal, then the A.P. handed me the voluminous schedule (the school had over 1000 students) and took me into the faculty lounge. He introduced me to the teachers who were there finishing up a meeting and told them to be sure to allow me in their classrooms. For the next four days I consulted the schedule to find a range of grades and subject areas to observe and just showed up at various

classrooms. Teachers at the school, who seemed quite used to being observed, had no problem with admitting me to their rooms and largely ignored my presence there. At the end of my four days I wrote an appreciative note to the A.P. who had helped me on my first day and to the principal. She wrote back saying that she'd love to help me anytime.

After my research proposal was approved, my advisor and I decided the school used in my pilot study could be a good site for my research project. It was large and diverse racially if not socio-economically, it was in a very large and diverse school district and the administration and faculty had been welcoming enough. I wrote to the principal who put me in touch with the A.P. again. Many months passed during which I assumed that the A.P. would approve my request based on my past experience and the previous offer to help. In June, after a couple weeks of constant emailing and calling for a response, he let me know that the upcoming year would not be a good one to have a researcher in the building. The school was starting a construction project, they had grown their student population and they were under pressure to implement Common Core curriculum and the new Teacher Quality Review protocol. Despite my attempt to convince him and the principal that I would be no trouble, I was left without a research site at the end of June.

I contacted teachers, administrators, fellow doctoral students and other people I knew who worked with schools in some capacity - teaching artists, school psychologists - in an attempt to find any middle school site that might be willing to take me. One of my contacts put me in touch with the college counselor at FDMS who thought that his principal Sofia Ray would be interested in my project. I was aware of Sofia and FDMS because my son and I had visited her school that fall as a prospective middle school. In fact, FDMS was the first school we visited

and it was during Sofia's presentation focusing on the importance of the socio-emotional curriculum at FDMS that I began to formulate my idea for researching girls' experience in middle school. Later I would learn that all middle schools (or at least all of the ones we visited in the district) spoke of how they supported students in similar ways. Still, FDMS stood out in my mind as having the most overt curriculum particularly through their daily advisory session, Crew.

Sofia, a doctoral candidate in education herself, met with me after an initial phone call at her summer school site location in late July. Sofia had been the co-director of the school for eleven years and was its founding principal after spending nine years as a teacher in the elementary school that shared the middle school building. She listened carefully to my project design, asked a number of questions about my program and my advisor and then told me that she would accept me as a researcher at her school. Her plan was to email her entire staff to ask them if anyone had any questions, concerns or objections. She made it very clear to me that all she could do was introduce the idea to the staff, it would be up to me to convince the teachers to allow me into their rooms for observation and to participate in interviews. Unlike other school-based researchers I had read about, I would not be introduced to the faculty and administration at large in a meeting and I would not be introduced to the parent body or school community in any formal way. My initial all-school emails to introduce myself and my project to the school went out through Sofia and after two such emails, she advised me to only communicate directly with teachers who had agreed to allow me access to their classrooms. I sent Sofia three updates on my progress during the year, all logistical in terms of when interviews and focus groups would be taking place, and we met three times to discuss the project. I also interviewed her as a part of

my data collection. At the end of the year, Sofia left the school for a position at the New York City Department of Education working on middle school literacy.

Despite having been a last minute arrangement and receiving a somewhat lukewarm welcome from the principal, I was excited to begin research at the school. Sofia had described to me the Expeditionary Learning (EL) model of the school which seemed very progressive pedagogically. I knew of the importance given to the socio-emotional curriculum delivered through Crew and Sofia spoke of the racial and socio-economic diversity in the school which was one of its founding principles. In early October I showed up at the school early with bagels, coffee and homemade banana bread which I spread out in the office so I could approach the teachers as they punched in for the morning and ask them to participate in my research project. That day I also roamed the hallways during lunch knocking on closed classroom doors where the teachers were eating lunch and holding meetings armed with chocolate to convince them to participate. At the end of day I had seven consent forms from teachers and by the middle of the next week, five additional forms. In retrospect while I might have liked a more formal welcome to the school community from the principal, I could appreciate her respect for the teachers in not urging them to take on the unwanted burden of a researcher. Her hands off approach to my presence in the school forced me to build relationships with the teachers on my own. In terms of personal relationships, I think I was successful in doing so, although professionally teachers were still confused about what I was doing and surprised I planned to be there for the whole year. Once in passing one of my favorite teachers in the hallway he asked if I was observing in his classroom that day. When I responded no, he showed relief and I asked why. He said “Oh, I’m just not

myself today. I'm all over the place" (Field notes, 11/4/13). To me, this indicated that he still thought I might be in class to assess his teaching.

Relationships with students were built over small moments – like sharing gum or pencils, helping with independent work in the class or just chatting in the cafeteria. There were dilemmas I had not considered before entering the field. In an eighth grade science class one day I observed a student cheating on a test. What should I do? I could perhaps strengthen my relationship with the teacher by turning him in, but that could also harm my relationship with the students. I decided that I was an observer and it was not my job to intervene if no one was in harm's way. Likewise, Cammie, a seventh grader, once came to visit me in the library when I knew she was supposed to be in science class. She explained that there was a substitute and they were watching a movie. She just wanted to sit in the library and do her homework. I told her she could do what she wanted but I didn't want her to get in trouble. When she asked me "Can't I just say that I was with you?" I told her that wouldn't matter much to the substitute and she reluctantly went back to class. Near the end of the year, during work time in class, a student shared with me that she had been sexually assaulted. In the course of her story she revealed that her family and her attacker's family knew what had happened and that she was in counseling. I confirmed with school personnel that they were aware of what had happened to the student. It was in this moment that I fully understood that there were real consequences to what I was learning about girls' experiences with gender and gender relations at FDMS.

CHAPTER 4: “You know it’s really hard right?” Friendships, relational aggression and sexualization of girls in middle school

Introduction

I ventured into the cafeteria armed, for the first time, with stacks of assent and consent forms - two sets, one for girls who were eleven years old and one for girls who were twelve years old and older - to distribute to the girls hoping that some would not be put off by the paper work or needing to get their parents’ permission and join a focus group. I hadn’t thought through exactly what I wanted to say beyond it’s after school and I’ll buy pizza and soda. I wanted to tell them not only what I was doing, but why I was doing it, as briefly as possible. I stopped at one table of relatively quiet sixth grade girls and explained my project and how I would like to talk to them about being a girl in middle school. Immediately one of them responded: “what if we think being a girl is terrible?” I assured her we could talk about it being terrible. I then approached a table of seventh grade girls who were talking loudly, reaching over one another to grab phones and laughing and got their attention. I explained what I was doing and then told them that because girls are doing better statistically than boys, there is the idea that it’s easy to be a girl in middle school. Imani, a smart and talkative girl, interrupted me to say “but you know it’s really hard, right?” (Field notes, 12/18/13)

This chapter provides an overview of the current literature on early adolescent girls in school as it relates to the prominent issues I saw at FDMS. Friendships and “the drama” that results from an emphasis on relationships, demonstration of relational aggression - which can be described as “girls turning on girls by spreading rumors forming cliques and even fighting” - and

sexualization of girls will be the focus of this chapter (Zittleman, 2007, p. 89). Research into the lives of middle school girls seems to support the idea that it is indeed “really hard” with the bulk of the literature on early adolescent girls being focused on mental health issues derived from body image concerns, plummeting self esteem and the importance, but fragility, of relationships. Likewise “middle school girls experience considerable emotional distress and pressure to conform to the rigid standards of the social hierarchy” (Letendre & Smith, 2011, p. 48). Middle school girls are often gendered in traditional ways, sexualized and pressured toward heteronormativity (Tolman, Impett, Tracy & Michael, 2006). The literature on middle school girls does not offer much variation outside these primary topics. Other literature becomes very specific focusing on subjects such as girls and physical activity and physical education (Elder et al, 2008; Gibbons & Humbert, 2008; Constantinou, Manson & Silverman, 2009; Pate et al, 2010; Baggett et al, 2010) or girls and science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) education (Werner & Denner, 2009; Farland-Smith, 2012; Denner, Werner & Ortiz, 2012). There is also research which highlights a specific demographic, for example African-American girls and science (Brown, 2010), at-risk Latina girls (Kaplan, Turner, Piotrkowski & Silbert, 2009) or “minority girls” and sedentary behavior (Spruijt-Metz, Nguyen-Michel, Goran, Chou & Huang, 2008).

The literature primarily, however, tends to focus on mental health issues such as self-esteem generally connected to body image issues and depression (Tolman et al., 2006; Kutob, Senf, Crago & Shisslak, 2009) and the importance of relationships which tend to be undermined by girls fighting or exhibiting relational aggression (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995) in middle school (Brown, 2005; Letendre & Smith, 2011; Radliff & Joseph, 2011; Dellasega & Adamshick, 2005). Girls are more susceptible to issues around friendships and “the drama” related to gossip

and relational aggression than boys. Research suggests possible reasons for this gender difference may be because relationships are especially important for girls and maintaining important relationships can be difficult. This makes girls more vulnerable “to experiencing depressed mood and diminished self-esteem” (Tolman et al., 2006, p. 85).

Additionally girls may be wrestling with the “pressures to attain impossible standards of attractiveness in a society that values physical appearance” (Tolman, et al., 2006, p. 85). In their study which looked at the relationship of internalizing conventional femininity ideologies and the mental health of early adolescent girls, Tolman, et al found that “internalizing behaviors and beliefs about what it means to be appropriately feminine are associated with girls’ psychological well-being as they enter adolescence” (Tolman et al, 2006, p. 91). Letendre and Smith (2011) also found that “young adolescent girls are bombarded with images of ‘ideal’ physical attractiveness, minimally recognized and supported for academic achievements, and pressured for involvement in heterosexual relationship” (p. 48). As Mercedes, a seventh grader, said, *“when you’re a girl it’s much harder because boys, they can do whatever..., for me, I feel like boys can do whatever they, they can say whatever, do whatever, but girls have to think about everything they do because everything they do can end up in a like really big situation”* (Interview, 5/22/14).

In much of the existing research the importance of relationships to early adolescent girls is paramount. The notion of the importance of relationships in the lives of girls and women was introduced in the seminal work of psychologist Carol Gilligan in 1982. In her work on gender differences in moral development she asserted that Freud, Piaget and Kohlberg, in writing about moral development based on male research participants, considered the process of separation

from others and primacy of individual thinking as essential for the latest stages of development. While in her research on women, Gilligan found that relationships and responsibilities to others remains a primary concern throughout life. She states: “Women’s moral weakness, manifest in an apparent diffusion and confusion of judgment, is thus inseparable from women’s moral strength, an overriding concern with relationships and responsibilities” (Gilligan, 1982, p. 16-17). Her findings on the primacy of relationships for girls and women are foundational for developmental research into adolescent girls.

The middle school experience, Lyn Mikel Brown, who conducted research with Gilligan, says is “a time when gender-related expectations are intensified - boys are pressed to be traditionally masculine, girls to be conventionally feminine” (Brown, 2005, p. 102). She argues that:

Middle school-age girls thus spend a lot of time and emotional energy dancing through the minefields of prohibited behaviors. They cannot be too smart, too fat, too thin, too sexualized or sexually experienced, too angry, too full of themselves, too much their own person. (Brown, 2005, p. 103)

In her book *Girlfighting: Betrayal and Rejection among Girls*, Brown talks about what she has learned from interviewing hundreds of girls. She writes that “First, girls depend on close, intimate friendships to get them through life” and “Second, girls can be excruciatingly tough on other girls” (Brown, 2005, p. 4). Her list of what girls do to one another include elements of relational aggression such as “talk behind each others’ backs, tease and torture one another, police each others’ clothing...and fight over real or imagined relationships with boys” (Brown, 2005, p. 5). These are all activities that I witnessed girls participating in at FDMS. Brown argues that though girls, especially middle school girls who are struggling with puberty and

defining who they are, need support from their friends, “in a sexist climate, it is also simply easier and safer and ultimately more profitable for girls to take out their fears and anxieties and anger on other girls rather than on boys or on a culture that denigrates, idealizes or eroticizes qualities associated with femininity” (Brown, 2005, p. 6). Unfortunately, instead of being met with support for one another, girls are more likely to display relational aggression towards one another. This behavior is so prevalent in middle school girls it is often “dismissed as a female right of passage” (Dellasega & Adamshick, 2005). Jessica Ringrose offers an important critique of relational aggression asserting: “My interest is in the naturalization of the notions of indirect and relational aggression as a feminine developmental issue and problem” (Ringrose, 2013, p. 32). She continues questioning: “What are the discursive effects of claims that girls are naturally relationally aggressive, and if this is accounted for are actually more aggressive than boys? What is the point of the construction of new gender differences and comparisons?” (Ringrose, 2013, p. 32). While the research identifies critical issues in the lives of middle school girls, Ringrose reminds us we must be aware of gender essentialism in these ideas.

This chapter describes girls’ experience in the school environment on a daily basis in relation to themes and issues related to the importance and the betrayal of friendships, relational aggression, (gossiping and other forms of manipulation that led to “the drama”), and evidence of the sexualization of early adolescent girls. I found issues of friendship and the concern over gossip that led to “the drama” to be the most prevalent concerns for the girls at FDMS. Sexualization of early adolescent girls is included here because it is a larger concern in our culture. I believe understanding this concern will help inform other critical ideas about the girls’ experience at

FDMS. Another major theme and factor in the girls' daily lives, boys' dominance in the school, will be explored in the next chapter.

Friendships

Girls' friendships with girls

Like Brown (2005) and Hey (1997) in their research on adolescent girls, I found that friendships and tracking the development and demise of friendships took up most of the girls' time and energy in school. Following the important and well-known work of Carol Gilligan around the importance of relationship networks to women and girls, it is easy to argue that: "The social fact of girls unique attachments to each other has often been naturalized" (Hey, 1997, p. 2). While relationships are important to girls, especially in early adolescence, creating and maintaining friendships was not a straightforward endeavor. Radliff & Joseph maintain that: "Relationships cultivated among girls are commonly characterized as open, warm and intimate" however, this is not always the case (Radliff & Joseph, 2011, p. 171). Friendships and larger friendship groups meant much more to girls than peer support or even a space for fun and relaxation. Brown (2005) suggests "The betrayal girls enact on each other derive largely from the rejection of their marginal place in the social order and their desire to have power - to be visible and taken seriously" (p. 128). The existence of friendships and even the end of friendships were ways in which girls negotiated their identities as well as their place in the social hierarchy at school.

Kathryn Morris-Roberts (2004) describes school as a space for girls that is "central to the processes of (dis) identification that contributed to exclusions and inclusions between (and within) friendship groups" (p. 237). A seventh grade special education teacher explained the importance of the ever-changing friendship groups in middle school this way: "*its the girls' way*

of establishing hierarchy. That's their fight, not a physical fight but it's like who can win the, who has the most friends. Because the rumor causes like people to choose sides. So that kind of establishes their dominance, I think" (Interview, 2/7/14). To a certain extent the girls were aware that some girls used friendships to exert their dominance or increase their popularity. Daniela, a sixth grader, in discussing a friend that she ultimately "broke up with" told me: "*She thinks that she owns us and that like we're a clique so we can start being mean to people and she thinks she's so popular that I didn't really like that"* (Interview, 5/20/14).

When I asked girls about friendships with other girls in the focus groups I found that they had a lot of anxiety and distrust of other girls. In fact when asked to describe how they felt about staying friends with girls, Imani, a seventh grader, said "*I truly truly do not want to get into the issue about staying friends with girls because then we will be here for five years"* (Focus group, 3/26/14). Brianne, a sixth grader, said matter-of-factly in describing girls' friendships that "*Girls have this unspoken language of hatred"*(Focus group, 3/26/14). Most of the girls said that it was "pretty easy" or "o.k" to make friends with girls, but that "staying friends with girls" was "pretty hard." The reasons varied from girls changing over the course of the friendship to an actual betrayal taking place. The girls told me about "mean girls" who judged their clothes, shoes and hair and "flip floppers" who would agree with anything they said in order to be friends. "Flip floppers" also described the girls who changed their minds back and forth about whether or not you were still friends for no apparent reason. Liann, a sixth grader, told me that the worst part about FDMS was how mean the girls were to each other. She gave me this example:

They'll be mean to you one moment and then the second, and then the next...this happened to me, I was wearing like sneakers and they look like they came from All Star

but it just had one star on it and they were like 'Oh, you have one star, look at your one star sneakers they're so weird and gross' I'm just like whatever I don't care. And the next minute I'm like sitting there twiddling my hair, I don't even know I just started doing that, and then they're like 'oh, your hair's so nice'. (Interview, 5/22/14)

In addition to being unkind, this treatment was a reminder to Liann that she was being constantly judged by the other girls in school. As Brown argues: "Such talk maintains a hierarchy of beauty, acceptability, purity - in short, it supports and even reproduces racist, classist, and homophobic attitudes, values and ideals" (Brown, 2005, p. 124).

As Brienne, a sixth grader, said it was hard to make and keep friends because "*you don't always know who's fake and who's real until you get to know them*" (Focus group, 3/26/14). Kiymani, a sixth grader, agreed that girls might decide to change their personalities in order to make other friends or to become popular. She said "*so they got one friend, but then they want more friends so they try to change their personality like my friend last year we were friends, but then she liked these other people and she said that like 'O.k. I'm going to be a troublemaker' or whatever and she would get into trouble all the time and I didn't want to be with someone that would be like that*" (Focus group, 1/22/14).

The girls also mentioned that some girls had "attitudes" and would say hello to them one day, while refusing to speak to them the next. Some girls were also hard to stay friends with because they "*brought too much drama*" into the relationship (Focus group, 3/26/14). Amelia, the Assistant Principal, identified negotiating friendships as the biggest issue for girls at FDMS. She said "*I think dynamics of friendship is very tricky and I think you see a lot of girls, I think um, there becomes like issues of allegiance to people that become very tricky*" (Interview, 4/3/14).

A few girls in one of the focus groups suggested that the shifting nature of girls' friendships was due to girls being "weird" and having "emotions." Boys, on the other hand, were perceived as not being emotional.

All of the teachers I interviewed acknowledged the importance of girls' friendships with some of them noting friendship issues as the biggest concern for girls at the school. The teachers understood the complicated nature of the girls' friendships and how problematic and stressful it could be for the girls. They made statements such as the ones that follow:

There's just like this complicated like 'who's friends' and like 'what did they say about this' and there must be this insane underground gossip network.

Merlin, sixth grade math teacher (Interview, 1/16/14)

Maybe just like they don't have each other's back enough. It's like a quick to judge, not quick to help.

William, seventh grade English language arts (ELA) teacher (Interview, 5/5/14)

The normalization of girls' intense focus on friendship can have an impact on how they are perceived in the classroom. Hey (1997) suggests "Girls have a vested interest in reproducing themselves as mirroring their friends" and thus there is a "tendency to treat girls as less individualized than boys" (p. 5). I saw evidence of this in some of the comments made by teachers. For example, Merlin, a sixth grade math teacher, a favorite among many sixth graders who frequently allowed students to play card games and hang out in his room at lunch said this: "*The girls in this school have like a hive mind consensus about certain things like certain*

boys. *I don't think the boys have [that], they are much more fragmented and individualistic as a group*" (Interview, 1/16/14).

While some friendships offered girls support and an identity within a friendship group, some peer groupings had negative effects on girls, particularly for girls who wanted to be popular. At FDMS, popularity was associated with acting out in class and not caring about academics. As one paraprofessional said about a seventh grade girl *"I don't think she's bad but I think she's influenced by the negativity around her, so she wants to act tough"* (Interview, 5/6/14). April, a seventh grade special education teacher, noted *"I really do think it impacts your academics. It impacts their emotional, social well being. If they don't have their friends they can't even think about turning in their lab report"* (Interview, 2/7/14).

When girls were friends, they displayed a lot of affection for one another. They would hug when they met up in the hallway, they would do each other's hair and they would generally look out for one another. In talking about two different close friends, Mercedes, a seventh grader, told me that she "loved" both of them. Likewise when girls disliked one another they talked about how they "hated" certain girls, wouldn't speak to them and how they purposely stayed away from each other - indicating that if they were together a fight would likely break out.

Girls' friendships with boys

In focus groups most girls agreed that it was easier to make friends with boys than it was to make friends with girls. Liann, a sixth grader, explained: *"They don't talk about that, they don't care about your features, they just care about if you like sports and if you like sports then that's a conversation starter"* (Focus group, 1/22/14). Jyoti, a sixth grader, agreed, *"I think it's easier*

because boys they're just easier to click with basically because they don't want to spread anything like if you tell a girl something and you guys end up not being friends anymore then it's just going to, they're just going to spread everything, basically girls have weird emotions"

(Focus group, 1/22/14). They also agreed that it was easier to stay friends with boys except if it turned out that the boy liked you. Imani, a seventh grader, explained:

Like you, you be nice to them, you be friendly, I'm not going to say no names, but this guy who I hang out with, I started talking to him 'cause I'm like oh yeah, he looks fun, he looks awesome he's friends with my friends, I should be friends with him too, so, I was being nice to him and stuff and one day he asked me out and I told him "Um, I'm sorry but I don't like you that way." And then it gets awkward 'cause I sit next to him in math class and I'm like "dammit." Awkward! (Focus group, 3/26/14)

A few other girls also shared experiences in which either their or the boys' intentions were misread in a friendship situation. Sometimes the situation was beyond simply awkward. Annie, a seventh grader, told me *"what I hate though is that when you find out that a boy likes you.*

That's like really annoying and it's like you just hate them. It's, they're just like so mean to you" (Interview, 5/30/14). When I asked Annie to explain why the boy would be mean to you if he

liked you she explained *"that's what teenage boys do, it's like, if they like you they're going to be mean to you and push you around"* (Interview, 5/30/14). Michael, sixth grade science teacher, characterized the cycle of friendships in middle school in this way:

So what you see now in sixth grade are a lot of friendships between boys and girls. And a lot of them will give that up starting the seventh grade and then by the end of the seventh grade, they won't have those friendships as much anymore. And then by the eighth grade, they'll start to come back. (Interview, 1/29/14)

Girls also noticed that the changing nature of friendship was specific to girls. As Carmen said “*I mean boys they change, but not a lot, they keep on hanging out with their boys*” (Focus group, 1/22/14). Friendships with both boys and girls served a variety of purposes for the girls and they could go a number of different ways over the course of the school year. When friendships went really awry, largely because of gossip, and betrayal was introduced girls had to become involved in “the drama.”

“Drama” and fights

Susan McCullough (SM): So what do you think is the biggest issue for girls in the school? Like the biggest concern or worry or problem for girls.

K: Drama.

SM: Yeah. Why is that the biggest problem?

K: I don't know, but it just is, because it's nothing worse than that.

Keisha, seventh grade girl who had been suspended for fighting with another girl

(Interview, 5/21/14)

Most of the teachers interviewed for the study believed the biggest problem for girls at the school was the “drama.” The drama refers to the gossiping among girls in the school or the “he said/she said” that often led to fights that took place in the school, in the school yard or even off site at parties. Drama was the intersection of friendship tracking and, the other important variable at FDMS, getting attention. Drama could also be understood as what some researchers have termed “relational aggression” (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). Relational aggression is form of aggression specific to girls that is indirect in nature. It has been described as “aimed at harming others

through purposeful manipulation and damage of peer relationships” (Dellasega & Adamshick, 2005, p. 65). Drama was a problem because it consumed the girls’ attention in school and distracted them in class, but it was also a problem because there seemed to be a high level of betrayal among friends at the school which led the girls to talk frequently about not being able to trust their female classmates and even their female friends. Amelia, the Assistant Principal, commented that drama also was born from the allegiances that girls had to one another - if something happened to one girl, then her whole friendship group was affected. As Amelia explained:

Then it becomes not just an individual problem but a whole group’s problem when something happens, and I think the ability maybe to make independent choices around stuff and to like let your friends make their own independent choices I think is something that, if we’re just thinking about frequency of what I sit around this table talking to girls about, you know, that’s what it is” (Interview, 4/3/14).

Teachers also pointed out that drama was not an issue for the boys. It was agreed that though boys might get into arguments or even physical fights, they were quick to resolve their differences and move on. Amelia, the Assistant Principal, explained it to me in this way:

I just had a conversation with a parent who um whose child got into a fight with another kid, like a physical fight, and she was very concerned and moving forward she wants him to stay away from this kid. But you know after a restorative meeting these guys are friends again, and so you know her son is like, “I’m not staying away, he’s my friend.” And you know she had called me concerned because she overheard that the other boy had gotten into another, he got in an argument that like you know, but so now her son is at home defending like “well, this other kid is..” And she’s like “but isn’t that the same

kid who punched you” and he’s like “yeah, but that other one needs to watch his mouth.”
So they’re, in some ways they’re so much simpler in their allegiances where it’s just like
“yeah, we’re cool.” (Interview, 4/3/14)

The students recognized drama as a significant problem. More than half of the girls I interviewed cited the drama as the biggest problem for girls in the school. An essential part of perpetuating the drama was gossip. Drama, the arguing and fighting between girls, was often based on miscommunications or intentional spreading of lies about other girls. When asked to rank the possibility of ignoring gossip in school, most focus group participants said they found ignoring gossip to be “pretty hard.” This is connected to the finding in the focus groups that all girls who participated in the focus groups found “staying friends with girls” to be “pretty hard.” Keisha’s comment that there’s “nothing worse than that” is consistent with what Letendre & Smith (2011) found in their focus groups with middle school girls. When asked about girl fighting in their school, one of their research participants commented “I think it’s like the biggest problem in the school” (p. 51).

Most of the girls agreed that the “drama” was over small scale or made up issues between girls. In some cases the drama involved a boy and his female friends disliking a girl from outside their friendship group. If that girl was interested in the boy, his female friends might feel the need to stress to her that she is not part of their group. Imani, a seventh grader, explained “*There’s a lot of drama between girls trying to go out with guys but then their friends liking him, there’s that*” (Interview, 5/29/14). Mercedes, a seventh grader, agreed: “*So it’s kind of like, it could be about anything not only about boys. But I notice mostly it’s about boys*” (Interview, 5/22/14). The

drama could also be over miscommunication. Imani told me *“females at this school misinterpret body language. Like they’ll think someone wants to fight them”* (Interview, 5/29/14). But girls also felt that there were some girls who just wanted to fight and would do so over small issues. Imani explained, *“they’re just fighting over the pettiest, like they’ll fight over petty stuff. Someone said this, someone said that”* (Interview, 5/29/14).

However some of the girls indicated that the drama really did affect them. When I interviewed Daniela, a sixth grader, she used this example of the impact of a friend revealing secrets. She told me how unhappy she would be to learn that a good friend had told her “crush,” the boy she secretly likes, that she likes him. When I expressed sympathy suggesting that of course you’d be upset in that case, she interrupted me to say *“you’d be heartbroken”* (Interview, 5/20/14). In this case not only does a friend betray a trust, but a boy learns that you like him which can be embarrassing.

While much research describes the prevalence of relational aggression among early adolescent girls, actual physical fights were common among girls at FDMS as well. In describing how girls fight differently than boys, Keisha, a seventh grader, explained that girl fights were serious and more violent. She said: *“with a girl fight once somebody push you, you go off on them, you start whaling on them, that’s it”* (Interview, 5/21/14). This was in comparison to boy fights which she never saw get serious. In fact other girls suggested that the boys didn’t fight at all. Imani, a seventh grader, explained *“‘Cause like guys don’t, ‘cause like most of the fights at this school is like girls”* (Interview, 5/29/14). Keisha described the fight she was in earlier in the year in this way: *“I pushed her and then she didn’t push me back, but she tried to hit me, she missed and then I, I, I punched her in the eye, but I didn’t mean to but too bad. And then, um, after it was*

over, we was just hitting each other” (Interview, 5/21/14). The fight, which took place in the gym, was eventually broken up by the gym teacher. Keisha was suspended for two days. The fight had started because a girl Keisha didn’t like had mis-heard something Keisha said in the gym. When she repeated it, Keisha confronted her and their argument escalated into a physical fight. Keisha had a high school mentor that she spoke with once a week and an “anger management girl” that she also met with on a regular basis. Generally in class she was quiet and respectful. In my observation she worked hard and contributed positively to the classroom environment. One of Mercedes’ close friends transferred to another school, so severe was the physical fight she had been in. When I asked Mercedes what the fight had been about she told me: *“It was about nothing at all. Like last year there was this little problem, this little incident where they didn’t even know each other and they just started arguing and then this year, it escalated to this”* (Interview, 5/22/14).

Drama was also a mechanism used at the school to get attention. Hey (1997) states that “Whilst masculinity is associated with the prestigious public sphere, femininity emerges much more strongly identified and (penalized) through its association with the socially denigrated private sphere” (p. 10). Drama, on the other hand, was always played out in public, thus bringing these “female” concerns into the public sphere. Lydia, a sixth grader, explained girls’ desire to fight in this way:

I think because they want to fit in and they know that like boys aren’t like that mushy type and everything so they want attention and instead of going to like get help and like telling their feelings they want to like ...take it out on hitting the person I don’t know maybe they feel better like that because they don’t feel as comfortable as other girls do. (Interview, 5/27/14)

Mercedes, a seventh grader, also believed that some drama was used just to get attention. She told me “*Like they want people to see the drama and stuff. And like they want everybody to hear their business*” (Interview, 5/22/14). She also offered a possible reason for the public nature of most of the girl fights. She suggested that some girls engage in fights in order to create a reputation of being “tough” so as to protect themselves from future altercations. Unfortunately this rarely worked out. As Mercedes described, some girls get into public fights “*So that people won’t mess with them. But all that does is cause more trouble*” (Interview, 5/22/14). Another explanation for girls’ desire to publicly engage in a fight with another girl could be for social status. Researchers of adolescent social goals have found that “when social status is measured with indicators such as *popular* or *cool* nominations instead of *like* nomination, manipulative, indirect, and even direct aggressive behaviors are often associated with high social status” (Kiefer & Ryan, 2008, p. 418, italics in the original). This was definitely the case for both the boys and the girls at FDMS. Many girls agreed that being disruptive in class and fighting was a way to gain social status.

I asked the girls in the focus groups how difficult they felt it was to “ignore gossip.” That is, is it possible to ignore the source of most of the drama? Most girls were clear that ignoring gossip was “pretty hard.” When I asked why they explained to me that it wasn’t just one person sharing one bit of gossip but rather that it was everywhere, all the time. Imani, a seventh grader, insisted that the gossip was “*in your face*” and therefore impossible to ignore (Focus group, 3/26/14). However there were some girls who recognized that to do well in school it was important that they focus on academics, not on the gossip or drama that so pervaded the school environment.

The drama caused the girls so much stress that often when I asked the girls if FDMS could do anything for them what would they want it to be responded with suggestions that would help them deal with the drama. Lydia, a sixth grader, suggested “*I think that should be a room where you can talk about all that drama and stuff without getting in trouble and like let go of your feelings*” (Interview, 5/27/14). Liann, a sixth grader, offered this: “*they would put like a cop on every floor and if a girl was being mean to another girl they would like put them in like suspension so they would not be mean anymore*” (Interview, 5/22/14). Annie, a seventh grader, shared Amelia, the Assistant Principal’s view, that small classes would make a difference in dealing with the drama (Interview, 5/30/14). One thing that struck me about all my conversations with girls about friendships and drama was how well they understood what was happening. While they might not understand why a certain girl would choose to dislike them or spread a rumor about them, they accepted that this was done on a regular basis. There were girls who had one or two good friends and actively ignored the drama. Overall, I was intrigued by the girls’ ability to discuss and analyze this phenomenon, but their inability to resolve it.

Teacher and administrator role in “the drama”

As noted above, the teachers at FDMS were well aware of the drama that went on among the girls. In fact most of the teachers cited “the drama” as the biggest issue for the girls at FDMS. They understood that the way these issues played out was part of something larger for the girls. William, a seventh grade English Language Arts teacher, said, “*I think there is like definitely an attempt at some kind of pecking order with like girl cliques and drama. I feel like it's not that successful though because they just keep getting mad at each other*” (Interview, 5/5/14). The teachers at FDMS, however, preferred to stay away from the drama as much as possible. They

prohibited discussion of it in class and one teacher, when teaching girls in a single sex 10-week elective course, informed the girls there would be “no drama” in the class. The teachers’ attitude towards the drama and their desire to not be involved in it, however, be problematic for the girls. Radliff and Joseph, discussing the role the media plays in girls’ understanding of relational aggression and adult intervention, found that:

In films, relational aggression is typically resolved by one of the girls choosing to stand up to those individuals perpetrating the aggression. This sends the message that students may hold the power to address relational aggression (Cecil, 2008). In reality, this type of action may not be sufficient and contact with appropriate authority figures may be necessary. (Radliff & Joseph, 2011, p. 172)

In other words, the girls were not always equipped to deal with the drama on their own and needed adult intervention. As with many other issues at school that the teachers and administrators viewed as inevitable, teacher accepted the drama and the girls’ struggle with it as a part of school life at FDMS.

While teachers choose not to deal with drama until it erupted in behavior that could no longer be ignored like loud arguments or physical fighting in the hallway, teachers seemed well aware of the amount of stress it caused for the girls. If, as the research suggests we are to accept high intensity friendships and relational aggression as a typical part of life for middle school girls then it would seem to me that Lydia’s suggestion for a separate space to talk about the drama is a good one. Simply insisting on “no drama” had no impact on the amount of drama in the school.

Amelia, the Assistant Principal, agreed that a lot of energy would go into resolving specific issues with girls, only to have the same girls involved in other issues with other girls the next week (Interview, 4/3/14). By refusing to discuss relational aggression with the girls, or to deal with it until it reached the physical fighting stage in school, teachers and administrators at FDMS were normalizing the behavior among girls and dismissing it as a “female right of passage” (Dellasega & Adamshick, 2005). This was one of many accepted, gendered practices I saw at FDMS.

“It’s hard to be beautiful”: Sexualization of middle school girls

In class Alicia tells me a story of going on the bus to the beach with her mom. She says she was wearing a beach pullover dress that she describes as coming down to her knees. She said that “an old man” on the bus told her she had “a giant culo” [Spanish for ass]. She texted his comment to her mom who was also on the bus and looked over at her like “really? Where is he?” but he had gotten off the bus. Alicia says that her mom was “going to slap him.” I say “that’s just gross” and she shrugs and says “It’s hard to be beautiful.”

(Field notes, 11/13/13)

The topic of sexualization of early adolescent girls was one that I did not explicitly discuss with the 11-14 year old girls in my study. While I asked them about their relationships with other girls and boys in school and while I observed and asked them about the sexual harassment I saw in the classrooms and hallways (this will be discussed in the next chapter on gender dominance), I did not ask them any specific questions regarding their experience with or understanding of the process of being sexualized. However I found that for many girls it came up in conversation.

Stories like the one above from my field notes were shared with me as I sat alongside the girls in class. These stories not only reveal that girls as young as 11-years old are fending off advances and comments from grown men in public, but also that in some cases they have normalized those interactions by acknowledging their own beauty and through an acceptance of men's inability to control themselves. The American Psychological Association's (APA) Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls (2007) report explains the conditions under which sexualization occurs. These included: "a person's value comes only from his or her sexual appeal or behavior, to the exclusion of other characteristics; a person is sexually objectified — that is, made into a thing for others' sexual use, rather than seen as a person with the capacity for independent action and decision making: and/or sexuality is inappropriately imposed upon a person" (APA, 2007, p. 1). The report clarifies that not all conditions must be present and that the last condition is "especially relevant to children" (APA, 2007, p. 1). The report makes a connection between the well documented sexualization of women in the media and the sexualization of girls stating that "these are the models of femininity presented for young girls to study and emulate" (APA, 2007, p. 2). Peers also play a role in sexualizing girls both when girls are policed into conforming their bodies to mainstream standards for beauty and sexiness and by boys specifically by "sexually objectifying and harassing girls" (APA, 2007, p. 2). The report also identifies the phenomenon of "self-objectification." Self-objectification is defined as a process in which "girls internalize an observer's perspective on their physical selves and learn to treat themselves as objects to be looked at and evaluated for their appearance" (APA, 2007, p. 2). Sexualization is linked, the research shows, with the three most common mental health issues for girls and women: eating disorders, low self-esteem, and depression (APA, 2007, p. 3).

More recent research by Graff, Murnen & Krause (2013) examining toys and clothes made for girls and pre-teens found that “clothing emphasized or revealed a sexualized body part (e.g., bikinis and push-up bras), or had characteristics associated with sexiness (e.g., red satin lingerie-like dresses)” (p. 579). They also found that dolls marketed to younger girls, but meant to look like early adolescent girls, had “a higher number of sexualizing characteristics” (Graff, Murnen & Krause, 2013, p. 572). The effects of this sexualization is harmful. Graff, Murnen & Krause (2013) assert that: “with the increased sexualization portrayed in media sources these messages may become normative in girls’ lives, making it more likely for them to accept the sexualized female role” (p. 579). Likewise researchers have found that girls who “adopt a sexualized ideal, who ‘self-sexualize,’ might be at risk for being perceived as less competent” in the classroom (Graff, Murnen & Krause, 2013, p. 580).

I will discuss the issue of sexual harassment of the girls at FDMS by the boys in the next chapter. Here I want to highlight the ways in which girls recognized or considered their own sexualization and how they negotiated it, as well as the idea of self-objectification. The kind of comments that girls spontaneously made to me about sexualization were often about other girls or about their relationship with boys. In response to a question about what it is like to be a girl at FDMS, Daniela, a sixth grader, offered: *“I’m kind of like protective, like I’m not like other girls like seventh graders like how they wear stuff that’s really inappropriate for their age. And I’m not like that, like, I cover myself I don’t like to show a lot like them”* (Interview, 5/20/14).

Daniela recognized that some girls in seventh grade were purposefully wearing tight or revealing clothes to get boys’ attention. She explained to me that not only was she forbidden by her parents from that kind of dress, but she that she “wasn’t like that” (Interview, 5/20/14). Imani, a

seventh grader, questioned the favors she was getting from certain boys and wondered why they would choose to be nice to her. She said “*when you get something it’s awkward and you know that they’re doing it for reasons, and if they didn’t like you they wouldn’t be doing it. And I’m like, so what would happen if I asked you for a dollar and you didn’t like me, hmmm*” (Interview, 5/29/14). Imani’s comment “they’re doing it for a reason” implies that something is expected in return.

One seventh grader described to me at length during one work period in social studies how she doesn’t understand why older men always harass her. She pointed out to me that she is always covered (i.e., doesn’t wear suggestive clothing), and that she used to wear make-up, but no longer does. She expressed a great deal of confusion over her role in perpetuating her harassment on the street by older men. As she talked with me, Sophia, a paraprofessional, continually interjected with advice on staying safe which included changing the route she walks to and from school, never being alone and if a man speaks to you tell him you are meeting your father on the next corner (Field notes, 4/9/14). This conversation took place at a table full of seventh grade girls many of whom were listening (as they always did) to Sophia’s advice. The girls’ instinct to cover themselves and dress modestly, the seeking of advice on how they can protect themselves from the advances of older men, along with the questioning of “what am I doing wrong?” to cause this harassment, are all indicators that girls have learned that this type of behavior is to be expected from older men and they are on their own in terms of dealing with it.

Self-objectification

As mentioned above, the APA defines self-objectification as internalizing an observer’s gaze and learning to see yourself as an object. While I was not scientifically looking for evidence that this

process had occurred, this concept explained to me some of the behaviors I observed particularly in eighth grade girls. My field notes include several examples of girls dressed in tight or revealing clothes who chose to pose in close proximity to boys. Teachers seemed to notice it as well. April, a seventh grade special education teacher commented:

At least with eighth grade girls, they will dress a certain way and then be like crying because a boy said something, called them a slut. Or that they touched them or something. And that they shouldn't be called, and I'm not saying they shouldn't be able to dress their own way but it was clear their intentions for dressing that way. (Interview, 2/7/14)

Shannon, an eighth grade math teacher, told me about an incident with one girl in her class. She said,

she had on an outfit – it was nice – it was a little tight in areas that shouldn't be tight and she usually doesn't wear those type of clothing and she was just like all over the place and like always near the boys...and I was like you know you need to sit down, that's where you need to stay for the remainder of the period because all you're doing is you're just flaunting yourself. (Interview, 1/23/14)

The APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls report had three primary recommendations for schools to combat the negative impacts of sexualization of girls. The first is the importance of media literacy. As the report states: “there is an urgent need to teach critical skills in viewing and consuming media” especially in this area (APA, 2007, p. 4). Additionally the APA recommends “increased access to athletic and other extra curricular programs for girls” and the implementation of “comprehensive sexuality education programs” (APA, 2007, p. 4). While many of these recommendations were mentioned by teachers at FDMS as resources that they

hoped the school might be able to provide for the girls at some point, there was no indication that any of them were likely to be implemented in the near future.

Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter was to create context around what it is like to be a girl at FDMS. I sought to share the issues the girls dealt with on a daily basis and which, in the case of friendships and “drama,” the girls, the teachers and school administration considered to be most integral and important to their school experience. I also included the issue of the sexualization of girls here because it seems to be a critical issue in our culture at large and provides important information that I believe will illuminate other related issues that the girls dealt with in school. It is important to note that in all these experiences girls were not just victims. Most of the girls, I would argue, had agency in their school environment and they used that agency in different ways. But, they also perpetuated many of the normalized gender roles that they were presented with and embraced them as part of the social fabric of the school. I will talk more about what I saw as acts of resistance in Chapter 6. I also believe that to a great extent the girls understood what was happening in terms of gender and gender relations in their school. In some cases they were clearly able to articulate what was happening and even why it was happening. In other cases they remained perplexed or looked for simple solutions that did not resolve the issues but would get them through day. Either way, in my presence, there was never an issue raised by one girl in a focus group, interview or casual discussion that was not understood by another girl. Likewise they all shared some version of knowing that being in school meant putting on their game faces and participating in the “opportunity and danger” (Erikson, 1950) of middle school.

I started this chapter with a quote from a seventh grade girl who claimed that being a middle school was difficult and I believe the research in this chapter supports that. Because all girls were largely consumed with friends, friendship groups and power struggles around popularity I wondered why there was never a time when they could just simply support one another as girls. The following incident, taken from my field notes, occurred during a test preparation session in a seventh grade ELA class. I assert that this incident underscores the universality of the girls' experiences in school regardless of their personality type or their social standing.

As part of the practice exam - understanding the nature versus nurture debate - a comparison is made between Kiara and Sheri. The basis of it is that Kiara is loud and outgoing and Sheri is quiet and shy.

Jade [the teacher] compares them, implying that by nature, they are very different and Kiara says, as far as I could tell without irony, "I'm like her" and everyone loses it. Jade really plays it up asking her about being in denial and Kevin [a well like paraprofessional] also repeats, "Kiara, Kiara you think you're like her?" Both Kiara and Sheri keep straight faces throughout the whole encounter though the whole class is laughing and hooting. (Field notes, 3/19/14)

Kiara and Sheri, both seventh graders, couldn't be more different. Kiara, African-American, is well dressed if not fashionable, developed physically and popular. She rarely smiles opting instead for a tougher, sort of constantly irritated expression. She is often in trouble in Jade's ELA class which means she gets a lot of attention. She will not hesitate to argue with teachers. Sheri, white, by contrast appears pretty dowdy. She wears baggy, bland usually pastel colored clothes and has straight, limp hair. She is very quiet. She rarely speaks in class and even in art

club, which she comes to every week, she doesn't say much. As she and I get to know each other, she will smile if I talk to her in the hallways or in class. She has a group of friends that she can sit with, but doesn't seem to have a best friend. In our interview Jade specifically mentioned Sheri as "the girl no one wants to be" because there is nothing outstanding or special about her and she is never noticed.

"I'm like her." Replaying the event in my mind I am still struck by how sincere Kiara sounded, how she never laughed or made eye contact with any of her friends in class or with Sheri. And how Sheri just sat there quietly as well. Did Kiara believe in fact that despite all outward appearances, they had so many shared experiences as girls at FDMS that she and Sheri were at least in some ways, alike?

It is not my intention in this chapter or in this anecdote to generalize about the girls' experiences. Clearly they experienced school and their lives as individuals representing a range of race and socio-economic class with families of varying immigrant statuses, among many other differences. However I do believe that, as this incident illustrates, there was a common girls' experience at FDMS and though they did not always empathize with one another, the girls recognized it.

CHAPTER 5: “You know how the boys are in charge?”

Gender dominance /gender segregation

Introduction: Gender dominance, symbolic violence and sexual harassment

During my first days at FDMS I was continually explaining my project to various teachers. A few commented that FDMS was an interesting place to conduct research on gender and gender relations because of the “boy heavy” and “boy dominant” nature of the school. A former parent, now working in the school library, also made the same comment. Some teachers clarified that by “boy heavy” they meant that there were more boys in the school. This fact was corroborated later by the Assistant Principal and the co-director of the school who cited the non-selective school admission process along with the high, and therefore well resourced, special needs population at the school as influencing factors for parents of boys. However as I began my fieldwork I came to think of the boys’ dominance in the school in a different way. In most classes boys commanded attention by misbehaving; in the hallways, boys were generally loudest and felt free to approach the girls for hugs or grab them or pick them up and carry them down the hall. Later, as I learned more about school-based resources, particularly those in place to address socio-emotional issues for the students, it seemed that many of them were geared towards the boys. As I spoke to girls and conducted focus groups and interviews with them, girls often referenced the boys’ dominant position in the school. Keisha, a seventh grader, made the comment that titles this chapter while explaining to me why I had observed girls not participating in class. She told me: *“You know how the boys are in charge? So it could be that they have a bad boyfriend and they are like trying to follow his lead”* (Focus group, 2/5/14). This chapter

discusses the girls' perceptions of the dominance of boys in the school, the ways in which boys utilized symbolic violence and sexual harassment to maintain their power - social, emotional and physical - over the girls and teacher denial of, and complicity in, the structure of power in gender relations between students at the school. This chapter also addresses the gender segregation of certain classes and resources at FDMS.

Gender dominance

It is important to clarify what I mean here by gender dominance. I argue that at FDMS boys and girls were performing traditional Western gender roles and policing one another's performance of these roles. Though both genders were engaged in this process, boys at the school necessarily exerted power over the girls in order to maintain their role. Additionally to play this role the boys needed to be disruptive in class and dismissive of academic success. In writing about hegemonic masculinity Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) remind us that "Gender is always relational, and patterns of masculinity are socially defined in contradistinction from some model (whether real or imaginary) of femininity" (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 848). In researching boys' dominance in the classroom environment in Australia, Dalley-Trim (2009) found that "while gender is a complex phenomenon, and the possibilities of diversity within versions of masculinity and femininity are vast, it is largely the case that the culturally dominant forms are maintained" (p. 56). These were the forms I observed being played out over and over at FDMS. As Lydia, a sixth grader, told me "*I think being a girl in FDMS is hard because like people expect a lot from you, you're supposed to be more feminine and stuff and like a lot of people expect you to be really girly*" (Interview, 5/27/14). In describing the expectations for boys she said "*all the boys here expect each other to be manly and tough....basically like you*

can't be soft. Like if you're soft like that like you're considered girly" (Interview, 5/27/14). Imani, a seventh grader, described the boys at the school as "competitive" and "macho" (Interview, 5/29/14). At FDMS gender inequity was reproduced on a daily basis through the maintenance of traditional gender roles which required the boys to exert power over the girls and be disruptive in the classroom and for the girls to participate in power struggles with the boys while maintaining their status as "not a problem" in the classroom (Archer, Halsall & Hollingworth, 2007, p. 550). Dalley-Trim (2009) argues "represented as coherent, rational and obvious, hegemonic masculinity is the form of masculine identity frequently aspired to by many boys, and that come to dominate classroom sites" (p. 57). The gender dominance I am talking about in this chapter is not the favoring of male students observed by researchers in the 1990s who went into classrooms and found that teachers were ignoring girls, calling on boys more often, and/or praising boys for their academic accomplishments and girls for their neatness or organization (AAUW, 1995; Sadker & Sadker, 1995). My observations were that given new pedagogies, and particularly the expeditionary learning model, which encouraged hands-on projects and "real world" learning outside of the classroom, embraced at FDMS, students most often worked in and shared their ideas in groups. Teachers who espoused project-based learning do less questioning and calling on individual students and more facilitating of group discussions and group work. Likewise, rather than relying on textbooks, teachers at FDMS utilized a range of resources for their students that ensured the inclusion of both genders and a range of races and ethnicities. The inequity that I saw at work at FDMS on a daily basis was not primarily enacted by teachers on their female students, but rather by male students on the female students.

Symbolic violence

In her research using Bourdieu and Passeron's (2000) concept of symbolic violence to understand one teacher's experiences within the public school system, Scott (2012) talks about symbolic violence and "symbolic power" as "a mode of dominance that helps legitimize an already existing social structure founded on and strengthened by social inequality" (p. 532). She goes on to explain "It is a reproductive force of what are already everyday practices in our social world — practices not necessarily recognized as problematic or dominating, and practices not often questioned" (Scott, 2012, p. 532). This interpretation of symbolic violence is useful in thinking about the ways in which the boys at FDMS, who ultimately had no real power, were able to maintain dominance and reproduce gender inequity at the school. Here I am suggesting that symbolic violence in the form of sexual harassment and verbal abuse were the tools used by the boys to keep the girls in a subordinate position in the school. It could be argued, and was by teachers at FDMS, that these hegemonic masculine practices were so deeply ingrained in the boys by the media and possibly their own family and neighborhood cultures, that this was their only model of masculinity. Likewise, the girls told me repeatedly that despite acknowledging that the boys were "in charge" at the school and noticing that the boys were the recipients of extensive resources denied to the girls, everyone was treated equally at the school. When asked about the types of general issues that might be present for boys or girls at the school, Imani, a seventh grader, denied any problems existed. Drawing on a perceived equity issue in sports, she proudly asserted: "*Sexism isn't that big of an issue here. Everyone thinks, respects each other like the age old thing about girls can't play sports, nah, we, we, we buried that here. We all play sports together, we all do that together*" (Interview, 5/29/14). Chambers (2005) argues that "gender inequality is *symbolic* violence because women (and men) comply willingly, with no need for coercion, and because its effect is to create symbolic normative images of ideal

gendered behavior” (p. 330, italics in the original). The normalization of the boys’ hegemonic masculine behaviors by the faculty and staff at FDMS contributed to the girls’ outmoded vision of gender equity and the belief it existed in their school.

Sexual Harassment

The American Association of University Women’s (AAUW) report on sexual harassment in schools, *Crossing the Line*, reported that from 2010-11 school year 48% of students experienced some form of sexual harassment in school. Girls were more likely to be harassed than boys (56% versus 40%) and girls were more likely to be harassed both in person and via social media (Hill & Kearnl, 2011, p. 2). The report also found that girls were more likely to say they were negatively affected by sexual harassment than boys. The negative effects manifested themselves in trouble sleeping, not wanting to go to school, decreased productivity and increased absenteeism from school (Hill & Kearnl, 2011). While at FDMS I observed multiple lessons, “town halls” and assignments that generally addressed the issue of bullying, but as supported by research on sexual harassment “schools are likely to promote bullying prevention while ignoring or downplaying sexual harassment” (Hill & Kearnl, 2011, p. 7). Without specifically addressing this issue in schools, it is unsurprising that 44% of students who acknowledged sexually harassing someone did it because “It’s just a part of school/It’s no big deal” (Hill & Kearnl, 2011, p. 15). Only 12% of girls reported the incident to a teacher, or another adult at their school (Hill & Kearnl, 2011, p. 26). This is consistent with what I found at FDMS. Research suggests that there may be a continuum between play-acting and harassing behavior and that where certain behaviors fall on the continuum can be confusing to adolescents (Lahelma, 2002). In one case at FDMS, a paraprofessional reported an incident involving what he believed to be sexual

harassment to the Assistant Principal (AP) and later learned that the girls asked the AP not to pursue it. Barack, a paraprofessional who works with an eighth grade student, described the incident to me in this way:

And when the administrator went and called those girls in, those girls didn't want to do anything about it. So, not only were they sexually harassed, they didn't even realize they were sexually harassed. And they didn't care that it happened to them. It was sad, I was sad. I went home that day like, "Holy crap, what is happening?" (Interview, 3/27/14)

The attitude of the girls at FDMS mirrored what Hlavka (2014) found in her study of violence, abuse and young women. Through analyzing interviews with young women who were victims or suspected victims of sexual abuse, she found that "Girls' characterization of everyday violence paralleled both their assessment that 'boys will be boys' and their understanding of harassment as a normal adolescent rite of passage" (Hlavka, 2014, p. 344-45). To that end girls in her study in discussing everyday examples of harassment "said they did not want to make a 'big deal' out of their experiences and rarely reported these incidents to persons in authority" (Hlavka, 2014, p. 346). In Lahelma's (2002) study, regarding whether gendered conflicts were always enactments of power or could sometimes be construed as "just fun", she found that "sex-based harassment acts, nonetheless, as a form of social control, and hence has material effects on all girls and women" (p. 302). This chapter will examine the concepts of gender dominance, symbolic violence and sexual harassment. These concepts will be illuminated through discussions of dominant boys and girls, romantic relationships, school based resources and gendered activities at FDMS.

Dominant Boys

Various girls commented to me in both interviews and focus groups that boys “do what they want”, “run the school” and “just think they rule everything.” In addition to these comments, my own observation was that the tone of most (but not every) classroom and certainly the hallways were dictated by what the Assistant Principal described in this way: “*I think you see more of the sort of boy play.... I think there’s an energy, sort of like a rough housing energy that permeates more*” (Interview, 4/3/14). The reality was that the ratio of boys to girls at FDMS was about 60% to 40% and while on the outset that did not appear to be that significant the Assistant Principal described a classroom setting one year in which she had 9 girls and 21 boys. It wasn’t just the comments that the girls, some of the teachers and the Assistant Principal made to me -- the evidence of boys controlling the tone of the hallways, and the level of acceptable behavior was observable. My field notes are replete with comments describing boys’ physically and emotionally dominating the girls throughout the school. Some of those are given below.

One girl comes in late to the all-girls’ elective class. A boy with his arms wrapped around her neck has walked her to the door and he kind of throws her into the room. He announces that she is here and walks out.

(Field notes, 10/17/13)

A girl with a bathroom pass returns to her eighth grade science classroom. The door opens and a boy (not in this class) is standing behind her with his arms around her. They take a few steps together towards the classroom and then he pushes her through the door. She laughs.

(Field notes, 10/17/13)

Carly gets up to throw something away and Donald stands up to block her way and hug her. She has to shove him aside coming and going to get him to leave her alone.

(Field notes, 12/5/13)

In our interview Keisha, a seventh grader, commented to me on how difficult it was to get the boys to leave the girls alone. She said, “*you know how boys are ones who like if they find a girl that they want, they go get her and if the girls say no they still try to get up on her*” (Interview, 5/21/14). In addition to this physical control exerted over girls’ bodies which included hugging them without asking and picking them up and carrying them down the hall, boys exerted their dominance through violent language. These included description of violence and also threats of physical violence. According to Eliasson, Isaksson & Laflamme (2007) this is typical in schools. They note: “Verbal abuse in school has been identified as a commonplace component of the lives of girls and boys that reproduces inequalities between genders” (Eliasson, Isaksson & Laflamme, 2007, p. 587). Examples of this violent language recorded in my field notes follow.

Waiting outside for a seventh grade English Language Arts class, a tall boy says to a seventh grade girl “I saw your sister. I slapped her too.” She just kind of shakes her head. A few minutes later she says to him “Why did you slap her?” He says, “I didn’t like the way she was looking at me so BAM [makes loud sound hitting his hands together].” Girl says, “she [her sister] beats up all the girls” and he says “yeah, but I’m a boy – I hit harder.”

(Field notes, 11/6/13)

Marisol and Donald come into library. At one point while they are wandering around, Donald calls over to Marisol “I’ll smack you.”

(Field notes, 1/6/14)

Caleb walks across the room to Carly during class and says “watch your mouth or I’m going to smack you.”

(Field notes, 1/16/14)

Malik says “I will slap you” to Carly and then Clay yells to him to do it. Malik pretends to do it. Clay says “She knows when I say it, I’m going to do it.”

(Field notes, 1/16/14)

April, a seventh grade special education teacher, told me she used to think that the boys treated the girls like they were “fragile” and needed protecting, but was surprised that this year she had already broken up two fights between boys and girls (Interview, 2/7/14). In their study Eliasson, Isaksson & Laflamme (2007) found that “by threatening violence, boys can construe themselves as being capable of using violence, even if they are not using it at that moment. Such verbal abuse alludes to discourses on violence and masculinity, and works as a way of presenting oneself as a ‘tough’ boy” (p. 594). Interestingly their study of Swedish eighth grade boys revealed that threats of violence were seldom used against the girls. At FDMS threats of violence against girls, particularly in the eighth grade, were very common. Eliasson, Isaksson & Laflamme (2007) suggest that “threats of non-sexual violence allow the potential interpretation that girls are of equal strength, or ‘one of the boys’” (p. 595). At FDMS it was also true that the girls, with less frequency, threatened to hit the boys. They would come up to the boys in the hallway and hit them or hit them back after being hit first or after being verbally abused by a boy. However, far from securing their place as equally aggressive or tough, girls were often

taunted for their weak attempts at demonstrating strength or control. Boys enjoyed showing the girls how little they feared being hit by them or pushed out of the way when boys attempted to block a girl's route through the hallways or in a classroom. Instead it was almost as if the boys enjoyed the physical contact they had, in most cases, forced the girls into enacting. Verbal abuse in which the boys policed the girls by commenting on their appearance was also very common. This scene from my field notes took place in the cafeteria:

Caleb and some other eighth grade boys are calling an eighth grade girl, Gizela, who is sitting with them (and her girlfriends) ugly. They then begin really discussing it with the other girls who either are telling them to stop, or just sucking their teeth and rolling their eyes. Caleb keeps talking saying: "Why would I lie?" "I'm just describing how she looks." Gizela at first tries to just smile through it, but her friends are not coming to her rescue as much as they are trying to show Caleb they are bored by him. Gizela looks increasingly uncomfortable.

(Field notes, 10/21/13)

This last observation is also an example of how the boys' dominance played a role in girls' friendships. Caleb was probably the most popular boy in the school. A tall, African-American boy, he was always surrounded by friends and girls trying to get his attention. Despite the fact that Caleb and Gizela were friends and he could often be observed lounging on her in class, he was verbally abusing and humiliating her in front of her girl friends - none of whom dared to contradict or stand up to Caleb in order to defend their friend.

While verbal sparring within friendship and family groups is accepted cultural practice in many urban African-American communities (Jones & Campbell, 2011), I would argue that the boys'

constant threats of violence, sexual harassment and policing of girls' bodies with denigrating language in a middle school context is outside this practice. Most teachers agreed that despite what might be modeled for students at home or in their neighborhoods, the school had the responsibility to set different standards for the school environment. Many teachers also agreed that the school was not serious enough in setting or maintaining these standards in part because of the progressive nature of the school. Jade, a seventh grade English Language Arts (ELA) teacher, talked about it in this way:

We don't have a culture that demands respect. We have first names, for God's sake, which drives me completely insane. We already set the stage for too much familiarity. We set the wrong stage so it comes out, sometimes with each other too, the way they talk to each other. (Interview, 2/26/14)

Bill, the Director of Culture and Character at the school, said this about the school culture versus family or neighborhood culture:

A parent brought that up the other day, no matter what we try to teach, to a certain extent we don't understand the [neighborhood] culture is what they said. So the stuff that we are trying to promote like restorative practices and things like that, we can speak that language in here but when the kid gets outside that's a whole different language. And I understand that to a certain extent what they are talking about but I don't think that they are mutually exclusive. (Interview, 5/27/14)

Whatever the source of the boys' hegemonic masculine practices, it was not successfully mediated by the school. While not all boys engaged in the practices as boldly as in some of the examples noted here, it was the accepted and primary behavioral mode for the majority of the boys in the school.

Dominant girls

Behavioral problem: Diamond

While discussing the perceived dominance of boys in the school a few of the male teachers cited Diamond, “our worst disciplinary problem,” as an example of the presence of dominant girls in the school. Diamond was an African-American seventh grader at FDMS. She was from the nearby economically disadvantaged neighborhood. Attractive, physically developed and fashionable, she was very popular and she was related to some of the very popular eighth graders. Her hairstyle and her sneakers were frequently new. Diamond’s typical behavior was to be very loud and disruptive. She was rarely in class and preferred to roam the hallways occasionally venturing into classes in session to talk to friends or act out. Once I observed her interrupt an eighth grade science class by walking in with an open umbrella and asking the teacher if it was raining in the classroom. She mostly sat with “bad” (and therefore) popular seventh grade boys at lunch and walked with them in the hallways. My field notes are full of comments about Diamond and her behavior. She would come in late, she would argue, and sometimes she would then just get up and leave. Suspended multiple times during the school year, in January Diamond received a superintendent’s suspension that required her to attend a special suspension school for approximately two months. When she returned to FDMS she had a daily discipline chart on which teachers had to rate her behavior every class period. Here is what Jade, a seventh grade English Language Arts (ELA) teacher, said about Diamond:

A lot of people would love to be Diamond. Even though Diamond always gets in trouble, Diamond gets all of the boys, I don't know why but the boys like Diamond. She gets a lot of attention because she is good at sports. She, whether it is good or bad always has

attention. She is always fashionable; she is always making a statement. They like some of that because it's not just blending in. (Interview, 2/26/14)

What I noticed about Diamond's behavior was that it mimicked the boys' behavior. She wasn't dominant in a "girl" way - she hardly ever engaged in relational aggression, nor did she get into physical fights with the girls – and, she wasn't dominant in her own unique way. She acted like the boys with high social standing at FDMS and was considered to be popular and powerful. Far from acting in the "girly" way Lydia suggested was expected from girls, Diamond behaved in the expected male fashion even when not seeking to be the center of attention. On one occasion while waiting in the hallway after lunch to be let into class, I observed Diamond walk up to Tori, a popular and often ill-behaved seventh grader, and without saying a word chest bump her as though in anger, pushing her against the wall. Tori, whose typical reaction in that situation would have been to start yelling and pushing back, looked at Diamond and asked, "What's wrong?" Diamond remained silent looking at Tori with wide, fearful eyes until a seventh grade boy explained, "Her father is downstairs." (Field notes, 1/30/14)

I am suggesting that while Diamond was certainly a powerful force in the school, her strategies for exerting control and getting attention were borrowed directly from the boys. Far from cutting a path for other girls to follow to obtain power or position in the school, she simply fearlessly mimicked the boys' behavior. There were other girls who were behavioral problems, particularly in the eighth grade, who like Diamond took a page from the boys' playbook. The difference being they tended to focus their most public behavior on boys rather than girls, as the boys did. April, a seventh grade special education teacher, said this about the girls striving for

the boys' attention: "[The girls think] maybe if I act like the, maybe if I am loud and disruptive you know, [the boys] will notice" (Interview, 2/7/14).

None of the other girls took the rule-breaking as far as Diamond did or received the same level of punishment. As a result she had many friends who were boys and gravitated to them in the classroom and cafeteria. She also had boyfriends at times. She did have female friends but in my observation they seemed less valuable to her and she spent less time with those friends than with the boys. To me, rather than stand out as a counter to the perception of boys' dominance, Diamond illustrated just how clearly the boys' masculine behaviors were valued in the social fabric of the school.

Smart girls: Laura

Another option open to girls in obtaining power and status in the school was through their intelligence and academic achievement. Many teachers who argued that boys did not dominate the school stated that the smartest students were girls and that girls were often outspoken in class. One such girl in the seventh grade was Laura. Laura was Haitian-American, tall and skinny. She had a tight knit group of friends, was good in school, popular with teachers and outspoken in class. While she was smart and generally focused, she wasn't shy around boys. She would happily engage in verbal sparring with a boy in class, though not that many were interested in engaging with her. She was also capable of projecting a "don't mess with me" attitude when necessary. In English Language Arts (ELA) she sat at a table with Felix, one of the worst behaved and most academically challenged students in the seventh grade and apparently a co-founder of a gang at FDMS, and was able to completely ignore him. I was impressed by her ability to absolutely shut him down to the point where he stopped asking to

copy her work or borrow her pencils. On the other hand, she was happy to help Matthew, a quiet Latino boy, who struggled with ELA work. Jade, a seventh grade ELA teacher, described Laura in this way: *“They [the other girls] don't want to be Laura. Why? Laura in their eyes is awkward and not that fashionable, not that developed. She's smart and that's it”* (Interview, 2/26/14). While it could be argued that Laura was dominant in the classroom, in the big picture of the school and the social hierarchy, this type of behavior was not valued at all. Having one's voice heard more often in the classroom when answering questions still could not compete with how much time had to be spent controlling the boys or girls like Diamond. Laura's intelligence was noticed and valued by teachers, but for her it did not translate into any power or status in the social hierarchy. As Jade explained when describing who the girls admired and emulated at the school: *“If somehow someone can master how to be smart, respectful and be interesting then maybe that would be ideal. But I don't think we have many examples”* (Interview, 2/26/14).

Romantic relationships

In discussing dating among the students the teachers agreed that boys would date any girl that they thought was cute or attractive, but girls dated certain boy specifically to increase their social status. April, a seventh grade special education teacher, explained: *“I think the girls look at boys more, when they are dating, I think the girls look at the boys more for status”* (Interview, 2/7/14). Often sixth grade girls dated seventh or eighth graders as the ultimate show that they were more mature than the other sixth graders. Once they were a couple the door was open for them to socialize with girls in the upper grades who were in their boyfriends' social circle. More often than not, it was understood that this socializing took the form of the older girls initiating the younger girls into “bad” behavior. As Michael, a sixth grade science teacher, explained to me while we were talking about Velma, a sixth grader who had recently begun dating a seventh

grader, *“She’s a really sweet girl but she is the one who is really trying to get away from sixth grade. She sees them as too young, too babyish”* (Interview, 1/29/14). The teacher went on to say *“I saw some of the seventh grade girls teaching girls like Velma... teaching her to do awful things”* (Interview, 1/29/14).

At FDMS boys with the highest social status tended to be those who did poorly in school and garnered attention by being disruptive in class. Once “going” with a boy in high social standing, the girl might feel obligated to change her behavior in order to retain her place in the couple and in the social hierarchy. The fact that being with certain boys had the power to change girls’ social status (and was not observed the other way around) was another way in which the boys held social control over the girls in the school.

Teacher perspective on gender dominance

Despite almost universal agreement between the girls that the boys dominated the school, most of the teachers I interviewed disagreed that the boys were the dominant gender in the school. I argue that teachers’ denial of the boys’ dominance was a critical component to their complicity with this dominance. The teachers agreed to having classrooms with over-bearing personalities both male and female, and insisted that both their smartest students and, as noted early, the biggest disciplinary problem in the seventh grade were girls. One seventh grade teacher, after denying boys’ dominance in the school, admitted *“I think we have a small sub class of boys who are, you know, a little bit too thuggish... their influence is incredibly pervasive”* (Interview, 1/16/14). He went on to say *“So the idea of controlling those boys takes a lot of our energy”* (Interview, 1/16/14). Likewise, a teacher who stated adamantly that boys’ behavior did not control the tone or environment in the school then went on to describe what the girls had to go

through in order to walk down the halls at the hands of the boys as “disgusting” (Interview, 1/29/14).

I would argue that the teachers and administrators at FDMS were able to normalize the boys’ sexually aggressive and abusive behavior towards the girls because they felt they were helpless to change that behavior. This idea will be discussed further in Chapter Seven.

Michael, a sixth grade science teacher explained what he observed in the hallways at length:

I think for a lot of the girls here ... it’s probably overly harsh – harsher than it should be. It’s probably way too loud, there’s too many moments when they have to block out a lot of noise, a lot of vulgarity. They have to walk down the hall ignoring a lot of physicality that shouldn’t be occurring anyway.

There is behavior in the school that, for years now, that absolutely should not be occurring; especially during passing and at recess. It’s just absurd and they absolutely should not be seeing it; not just the girls, everybody. But I think that the girls, and I’m not trying to be sexist but I think to myself as a father, I don’t want them to have to walk – it’s like walking the gauntlet.

They [the girls] walk down the hall and I can see them just like moving through the hall like an obstacle course through all the nonsense. And I think they do it and they know how, but should they have to – no. (Interview, 1/29/14)

The sentiment of feeling bad for the girls for having to deal with the boys’ behavior at school, particularly in the hallways, was echoed over and over again by teachers, the librarian, the

Assistant Principal and the paraprofessionals who worked in the school. Their comments about the girls' experience indicated a serious concern such as: *"The girls are constantly harassed. It's terrible"*, *"If I were a girl here I would feel horrible. I would."* Only one African-American teacher, Jade, stated that the kind of teasing and harassing that went on was typical for an urban population and *"no big deal."* (Interview, 2/26/14). While she did not "feel sorry" for the girls, like so many other adults in the school, she did not feel that the girls were in a position of power. She explained her perception of the girls and their relationship with the boys in the following way: *"The girls here are really sort of very humbled to the boys. Like, they want the boys to like them, they want the boys' approval in a way that is different. My other school you find that the girls are hot, are even more sexually interested but they are the initiators, they are the people that make the decisions"* (Interview, 2/26/14). Jade would have been happy to see the girls engage with the disruptive and even sexualized antics of the boys, but despaired at them not being able to do so on their own terms. Shannon, an eighth grade math teacher, said about the way the girls were treated in the hallways by the boys: *"Why would you want to hug somebody or have them feel on you when they're feeling on every other girl in the building and then he just feels like oh, I can just come and hug you and do whatever. I just feel like that's a matter of disrespect for your own self"* (Interview, 1/23/14).

If the ups and downs of girl friendships and the betrayal and violence of girl "drama" was interpreted at FDMS as "girls being girls" as discussed in Chapter Four then the aggressive and disruptive behavior of the boys in classrooms and hallways was surely dismissed as "boys being boys." Several teachers recognized and shared concerns with me over the behavior they saw the

boys exhibiting in the hallways both towards random female students as well as their girlfriends.

As the Assistant Principal told me:

I think the student to student area in terms of gender relations that I, that concerns me the most is the way that I see middle school boys interact with their respective girlfriends.

Um, and I think we, I see a need for some real work with middle school girls around boundaries and empowerment and confidence and you know who gets to hold you which way and who gets to grab you which way and you know who gets to touch you which way and I see that lacking right now in terms of the student to student. (Interview, 4/3/14)

Individual teachers made efforts to speak to both boys and girls about the behaviors they witnessed, but during the time that I spent at FDMS no discernible changes in behavior were ever manifested. William, a seventh grade English Language Arts, teacher offered an explanation for how much the teachers could try to accomplish. He said: *“I think there is more slack that girls are supposed to take up”* adding *“I have heard so many teachers and administrators go to girls and other boys even, but mostly girls [and say] ‘you just need to learn to ignore him’”* (Interview, 5/5/14). Lahelma, in her study of gendered conflicts in schools, found that teachers in her study normalized boys’ sexual harassment of girls. She argues that *“sex-based harassment is not easily regarded as a gender issue by teachers either. It is often seen as a part of normal relationships, as an adolescent ‘mating dance’”* (Lahelma, 2002, p. 303).

While teachers were quick to cite media, rap music and the families of the students as sources for this behavior, their willingness to look the other way reinforced gendered stereotypes about male and female behavior particularly for students who sought to move higher up the social hierarchy at FDMS. Lahelma (2002) notes that when teachers ignore negative comments made between students it *“communicates to students that such behavior is acceptable”* (p. 303). I would argue

that not only was this behavior damaging to the girls in the school, but by failing to address it, teachers and faculty also contributed to the pathologizing of the boys and to creating a strong gender dichotomy within the school, leaving little room for LGBTQ students.

School based resources

Boys not only exerted power and influence over the girls in school, but they also commanded a large share of the school's resources. Though the special education coordinator commented to me that she thought there might be more girls than boys in special education, there were no girls in the self-contained special education classroom, only one girl had her own paraprofessional as opposed to three boys in the school, and I rarely if ever witnessed girls receiving special services. On a weekly basis I would observe boys receiving services such as talk therapy, occupational therapy, and academic assistance in the library from the school's army of social workers and counselors. My field notes reveal a total of two observed sessions with girls, one of which followed a specific incident in which an eighth grade girl was extremely upset when a teacher confiscated and then lost her phone. A few girls had high school mentors and at one point in the year Keisha, a seventh grader, was assigned an anger management counselor and her sister, a sixth grader, began to receive talk therapy at school. While some teachers lamented that there were not enough non-academic activities in general for the students at FDMS, many also specifically noted that there were very few for girls.

One of the programs for at-risk boys at the school was the Young Men's Initiative (YMI). This relatively new program was very visible because the participants would be given a colored slip when they got to Crew that reminded them it was their day to come down and participate in the

program. The whole class would notice the boys being handed their slips and their exit from the classroom. From what I observed, the boys had different reactions to being participants in the program. Some boys were happy to go even asking for their slips when they entered Crew, although these boys were sometimes challenged by others who questioned why they were excited to go. Others would moan and take the slip begrudgingly. The co-director of the school told me that the gender specific nature of the program “*was one thing that made reticent to take YMI. I got them to work with two girls*” (Interview, 5/22/14). Girls also had mixed reactions to Young Men’s Initiative. Some girls told me that the boys needed YMI because they needed extra help. Lydia, a sixth grader, told me: “*I think it’s fine because I think that like the boys need more help than us [laughs]. Like the girls like I think they can solve problems...But boys are tough and soft and if they go to another person to talk about that they’ll be like ‘oh why are you coming to me to talk about that like all mushy and stuff’*” (Interview, 5/27/14). Liann, a sixth grader, perplexed by YMI, told me: “*And I asked my mom and she was like ‘Maybe it’s because more guys go to jail and do bad things than girls so guys need more help.’ And I’m just like ‘fine’*” (Interview, 5/22/14). Some girls were relieved to not have YMI and felt that it reflected positively on them. Sarah, a sixth grader, told me when I asked her if she could think of a time when it was good to be a girl at FDMS “*Well, first, because we don’t have to be in the Young Men’s Initiative and I feel, more like, better that they think we’re mature and like we don’t need like an extra thing to make us more responsible*” (Interview, 5/19/14). Other girls did not care about the Young Men’s Initiative at all. When I asked Mercedes, a seventh grader, how she felt about it and if she thought there should be a Young Women’s Initiative she responded: “*Who cares?*” (Interview, 5/22/14).

Other girls felt that there should be similar programs for girls especially those that offered rewards as YMI did. Annie, a seventh grader, told me *“I don’t like how it’s just the Young Men’s Initiative like if it could be the Young Men and Women’s Initiative that’d be more cool ‘cause more people would be there for support and everything and like that’s like to me that’s not a cool separation”* (Interview, 5/30/14). Liann, a sixth grader, also felt like there were unfair advantages given to the boys who participated in YMI. She said: *“Like if they show up and they do good progress they’ll get a gift card for Subway’s and I’m like, I want that. Or they’ll get a gift card to GameStop. I’m like I want that. Or they’ll get movie tickets and I’m like I want that”* (Interview, 5/22/14). We agreed that YMI unintentionally ended up rewarding the boys for misbehaving and thereby needing a program while girls who did not misbehave did not get a program or a chance to earn rewards. Liann noted: *“It’s messed up. I don’t understand that”* (Interview, 5/22/14).

Bill, the school’s Director of Culture and Character, told me that he believed there were more resources at the school for boys and said about the girls *“I don’t think there are any real activities here at school that cater to them. Which is something that we need to work on”* (Interview, 5/27/14). Later in our conversation he said again: *“I think at FDMS that is something we are lacking, figuring things for girls”* (Interview, 5/27/14). At FDMS like many other schools “a dominant educational discourse persists, positioning girls as ‘not a problem’ and hence not deserving of particular attention or resources” (Archer, Halsall & Hollingworth, 2007, p. 550).

Gendered activities

YMI was not the only gendered activity at the school. All of the electives, which included Health and Physical Education but also Drama and Art, were single sex. This was a new innovation the school was trying for the first time that year. The primary reason given was the need to split the students by gender for Health and Physical Education. But the administration also defended the single sex electives saying that it created a “break” for the students. Amelia, the Assistant Principal, had taught at the school for five years, but was new as an administrator that year so she had not been part of the decision-making process around creating the single sex electives. However, she saw the single gender electives as positive for both boys and girls. She said: *“I think there is so much to gender dynamics in middle school that giving kids a space in their day where they are not confronted with that like boy girl drama can be like really really powerful”* (Interview, 4/3/14). She acknowledged, however, that the girls single gender classes were smaller (12 or 15 in a class as opposed to 30 boys) given the gender ratio at the school and this, along with behavioral issues, had led many teachers to look forward to teaching the girls and dread having the boys. Interestingly, this led right back to a concern about the boys. In discussing this issue Amelia said: *“But we have to figure out how to make sure that like both groups of kids are really served by, you know, what are the boys getting and do they need a different curriculum? You know maybe they don’t take visual art”* (Interview, 4/3/14). Amelia espoused progressive education in terms of group work and project-based learning. She longed for the students to be able to get out of their seats more often and even get out of the school more often. But, when it came to discussing the single gender electives she told me: *“I think you almost need two separate curriculums”* (Interview, 4/3/14). She also discussed how wonderfully the drama teacher had been able to teach to the strengths of different groups by having the girls write plays about friendships and having the boys do stage-fighting. As we talked, I wondered

out loud about how this plan might impact students who were working on developing their gender identity. Amelia, noting that she had gone to Oberlin where there were gender neutral bathrooms, said: *“I see the total value in that like space that’s separate from that friction of those other spaces and on the other side that like sort of clear cut line of gender is tricky and is a little bit more traditional than we are trying to be as a school”* (Interview, 4/3/14). This is another example of the gender essentialism that was pervasive at FDMS and will be explored in Chapter Seven. It is also another example of the school leaving little room for LGBTQ students.

Teachers also sometimes made the decision to separate the boys and girls during Crew to discuss gender-specific issues generally related to puberty and health education, but sometimes related to behavior as well. Most teachers felt that this was a good strategy for allowing the girls to talk about their concerns or questions, whereas for the boys it was often a time to be chastised for their behavior. The teachers also felt that the girls wanted to be apart from the boys. Michael, a sixth grade science teacher, said of his Crew: *“But the girls were so happy to be by themselves and be away from the boys. They were so happy”* (Interview, 1/29/14). Vivian, a seventh and eighth grade special education teacher, also said of her Crew: *“But I was really surprised by this group how much they wanted to be away from the boys. And they said that some of the boys had been bothering them”* (Interview, 1/31/14). Vivian’s comment underscores one of the teachers’ primary reasons for separating the students by gender -- hoping that the girls would feel comfortable discussing issues that were bothering them in school. The teachers’ interest in separating the classes, specifically sixth grade Crew by gender, also came from the concern that the girls knew very little about the process of puberty or menstruation. The students would not receive Health class until seventh grade which many teachers felt was too late. Only one teacher,

a male, expressed any issues with separating the students by gender. William, a seventh grade English Language Arts teacher, said this when I asked him if he separated his Crew by gender for discussions: *“I don’t like doing that because it like, normalizes gender norms and so that’s weird”* (Interview, 5/5/14). He also noted that his Crew co-teacher, also male, thought it was a good idea, so sometimes he would go along with it. When I asked William what he thought of the single gender electives he said: *“I’m really confused as to why that happens. I think it’s kind of archaic actually”* and later in that conversation asserted again that separating the students by gender *“just like reiterates the gender norms”* (Interview, 5/5/14). While he had issues with classes being separated by gender, he did later say when asked what FDMS could do to help the girls with many of the issues that they deal with in school: *“I hear people saying there has got to be like a girls’ group and like talk about how to make sure you are being respected and how not to get taken advantage of and things like that, which is very, very true”* (Interview, 5/5/14).

Girls had mixed reactions to being separated from the boys. When asked why she thought the school sometimes separated boys and girls in classes, Keisha, a seventh grader, said *“Because it, it’s like o.k. Girls, we fool around too, but we know when to stop like we don’t keep going like boys so if it’s an all girls’ class we will get things done and we will, won’t be distracted by the boys. And some of the girls have boyfriends so if they in there with the boys then they will fool around with them and all that”* (Interview, 5/21/14). When I asked Keisha to explain how the boys distracted girls in class she told me: *“They like touch us, call you, they will try to cheat, anything, anything possible they can do, throw something at you, anything just to make you not do your work”* (Interview, 5/21/14). Because of this Keisha was actually in favor of the gender specific classes. In fact when I asked her what she would want FDMS to do for the girls if they

could do anything, she said: “*Separate us from the boys*” in every class (Interview, 5/21/14). Other girls enjoyed time away from the boys, but didn’t feel it was necessary to be split up for every class. Lydia, a sixth grader, echoed the sentiments of the Assistant Principal in appreciating getting a break from the boys. She told me: “*Separating us for a period is actually good ‘cause when we’re around a girls we’re so much more comfortable and girls understand girls and you could talk about what you want and like for the rest of the day you’re with boys so I think it’s like a break off of them*” (Interview, 5/27/14). However Lydia was quick to recognize that to do so for the whole day would just be reinforcing gender norms. She argued: “*If you separate girls with girls and boys with boys for all the periods... it’s like not right, they’re basically, it’s like stereotypical ‘cause like I know that basically they’re saying ‘oh girls are like this so they should be with girls’, ‘boys are like this so they should be with boys’*” (Interview, 5/27/14). Other girls felt like it was unnecessary to split the genders up at all. These girls tended to offer the explanation that they were, and had always been, friends with boys and so for them there was no issue of distraction. Girls also explained that they knew how to deal with the boys in class. Regardless of their opinion on the issue, the fact that the school divided the students by gender provided the opportunity for both the boys and the girls to at least consider, if not assume, the gender essentialist nature of the decision.

Conclusion

This chapter has provided insight into how boys and girls at FDMS worked to develop their gender identities in relation to one another and in the specific context of their middle school. Eliasson, Isaksson and Laflamme (2007) assert: “Through speech and actions, gender identities — masculinities and femininities — are formulated and reshaped” (p. 588). This reminds us that

“girls and boys are active participants in the production of their gender identities, and not only the passive subjects of socialization into gender roles through institutions like the school and family” (Eliasson, Isaksson & Laflamme, 2007, p. 588). Students clearly negotiated school and family along with their peer groups at school as they developed and “performed” their identity (Butler, 1990). Because the accepted male and female role options at FDMS were traditional gender roles, it could be argued the students and the school were engaged in social reproduction of gender inequity.

Despite comments by teachers and administrators alike on how “horrible” middle school was for the girls and how more resources were needed to support the girls, school was deemed to be a gender equitable site, one in which most teachers insisted the boys did not dominate. That is, this traditional role-playing was carried out in an environment that insisted it was not traditional. And yet, as I have shown, this environment normalized the hegemonic masculine practices as typical adolescent behavior. Lahelma (2002) suggests that “the impact of informal hierarchies based on hegemonic masculinities may be easily forgotten by teachers and other professionals in a situation when (some) boys’ failure in academic terms is emphasized in educational discussion” (p. 302). Rather than use the anti-bullying curriculum or the space of Crew to deal with gender issues on a regular basis, teachers addressed these practices only when they were so egregious they were impossible to ignore. This complicates the opportunity to discuss sexist behavior. As Lahelma (2002) notes “If teachers rely on opportunities for reflexive discussion developed on the basis of negative comments or deed by students, then these questions are discussed in the context of problems and specific students may be the main focus” (p. 303). I would argue that the way in which gendered conflicts were handled in the school along with the

number of resources that were specifically allocated for the boys served to pathologize the boys in the eyes of the girls, thereby essentializing their “boy behavior” and forcing the girls to determine individually how they would negotiate the sexual harassment and verbal abuse they encountered on a daily basis. I will say more about the postfeminist practices for individual protection I saw the girls enacting in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 6: “What message are you sending?”

Response, resistance or agency

Introduction

This chapter discusses particular practices in which girls at FDMS engaged in response to the school environment, particularly the gendered expectations of their teachers, their concern with their reputations and the ongoing harassment by the boys. I also examine the contested notion of agency (Gonick, Renold, Ringrose and Weems, 2009) and consider the way in which that concept is useful in understanding and analyzing the actions of the girls at FDMS. As will be discussed below I believe the practices I saw the girls engaged in are critical to understanding their daily experience, but I struggled with the best way to describe them: response, reaction or agency. The title of this section derives from my interview with Bill, the Director of Culture and Character at FDMS. He was recounting an incident in which he had confronted a high school girl for wearing inappropriate clothing. He explained: “*Her shirt was too short and it said, ‘talk dirty to me’. And I was like, what message are you sending? I’m a guy, what message are you sending? You know if you were my daughter I think we would have a problem right now. You really probably wouldn’t like me. You know, but what message are you sending?*” (Interview, 5/27/14). In this exchange Bill assumes several different roles: first, he is an administrator at the school capable of giving the girl detention or some other form of school-based punishment; he is also acting as an educator as he asks her to think critically about the choice she made to wear that shirt to school; secondly, he casts himself into the role of “a guy” and asks her to consider how “a guy” might perceive her intentions in wearing a shirt that is revealing and suggestive; finally, he adopts the role of her father implying another possible level of punishment and, I would

argue, an element of shame about the message she is sending. I suggest that the girls of the middle school at FDMS were also being scrutinized for the messages they were sending through their language and actions. My analysis of the data reveals that this scrutiny required the girls to enact a range of practices, some of which I will argue were detrimental to them as students, and either fulfilled or challenged the expectations they felt the school was placing on them as girls. Below I will briefly describe the practices that will be explored in-depth in this chapter.

The first practice I will examine is what I describe as *willful non-participation* in the classroom. Willful non-participation occurred when a girl made the decision to either quietly disengage from the lesson being taught in the classroom and all group and individual work or when she more aggressively chose to put her head down and/or cover her head with the hood of her coat. In some cases more defiant non-participation occurred when a girl was asked to move her seat or participate and she refused non-verbally. This practice was so pervasive at FDMS -- observable across all three grades and in every subject area -- that I regularly asked about it in my interviews with teachers and in focus groups with girls. Teachers and girls were familiar with the practice and had a range of ideas about why girls might choose to engage in it. This practice is a concern and could be harmful to the girls because it had an impact on their ability to learn in the classroom and their grades. It seems to resonate with the self-esteem and insecurity issues that plague many girls at this age. Yet based on my observation I would argue that rather than falling victim to early adolescent insecurity some of the girls were actively choosing to engage in willful non-participation; they would not necessarily do it everyday or in every class. It seemed to me that some of the girls were using the practice as a means to communicate or send a message to their teachers. This practice was also in direct contradiction to the academic and behavioral

expectations of girls by the teachers. Girls recognized that teachers had higher expectations for the girls than the boys. Lydia, a sixth grader, told me: “*They expect more of girls ... I think boys get away with like a lot of stuff in school ‘cause girls like they get really in trouble like if they’re doing something they’re not supposed to be doing*” (Interview, 5/27/14). I assert that it is important to examine this potentially harmful practice and consider if the girls were challenging these expectations and the essentialist gender stereotype that girls are more likely to be successful at school with this practice.

The second practice I will discuss is what I call *controlling the narrative*. This involves the attempts the girls made towards controlling the narratives being created about them. As has been discussed, the creation and spreading of gossip at FDMS was pervasive. Gossip typically manifested itself in “drama”, the arguments or physical fights between girls based on what they had heard said about themselves or other girls. Gossip and the way in which a girl was perceived socially at FDMS could also have an impact on her ability to move up (or down) in the social hierarchy. So intense was the potential to have any comments or actions affect one’s reputation that Cammie, a seventh grader, told me “*I don’t talk to anyone - that way you stay out of trouble*” (Field notes, 4/9/14). Lee and Smith-Adcock (2005) emphasize in their study on the relationship between delinquency and students’ perception of their own reputation that “the school environment is a primary setting for the development and maintenance of adolescent’s reputation” (p. 79). They found that students’ perception of their own reputation had an impact on their social behavior and academic choices (Lee & Smith-Adcock, 2005). While some girls chose to isolate themselves socially in order to avoid conflict, I argue that other girls often attempted to control the narrative being created about them. They did this by “trying on” or

“trying out” different descriptors for their previous actions in conversation with teachers and with their peers. In most cases these attempts were unsuccessful, but they reveal the ways in which the girls attempted other identities through re-naming their histories. They also reveal the extent to which the girls had control over teacher and peer perceptions of them and their reputations.

The third practice I will examine falls under what I call *expressions of postfeminist ideologies*. These practices include: the girls’ defense of gender equity at the school, their strong cultivation of individual responsibility, and the particular strategies they developed to fend off sexual harassment from the male students. I argue that these practices were postfeminist in nature and were developed necessarily by the girls in order to negotiate sexism in the school environment. These practices align with the postfeminist tenets of refuting the need for feminist advocacy and embracing individual solutions as opposed to recognizing and addressing systemic oppression. These practices were also directly connected to gender essentialist policies in the school and the harassment the girls withstood from the boys while the teachers looked the other way. For example, many girls chose to adopt a “tough” or “mean” attitude in school for the primary purpose of fending off the boys. They explained to me that “they [the boys] know not to touch me” or “they [the boys] know what I’ll do if they touch me.” While I do not suggest that the girls understood these practices to be postfeminist, I will consider the extent to which the girls’ engagement in such practice may work to propagate a postfeminist ideology in the school.

Girls and the concept of “agency”

In the introduction to their special issue of *Girlhood Studies* entitled “Rethinking agency and resistance: what comes after girl power,” editors Gonick, Renold, Ringrose and Weems assert that “the concepts of agency and resistance are central to girlhood studies as they have been for youth and cultural studies more broadly” (2009, p. 4 – 5). They suggest that the concept of agency must be rethought in “the rapidly changing social, economic, political and global media contexts emerging out of neoliberalism and what Gill (2007) has called a post-feminist sensibility” (Gonick, Renold, Ringrose and Weems, 2009, p. 2). During my fieldwork I was very interested in observing the girls’ practices of willful non-participation, controlling the narrative and expressions of postfeminist ideologies. They seemed critical to understanding girls’ daily experience at FDMS. In my analysis of these practices I struggled with how to characterize them: response, resistance or agency? Early adolescent girls are not simply victims of school based policies or masculine hegemonic behavior. Nor, are they necessarily agentic, self-advocates or resisters. What was motivating these practices? Why did some girls engage in them and not others? Can there be resistance without articulated acknowledgement and refutation of oppression? At FDMS girls were always acting and being scrutinized within the confines of a gendered environment. It is useful to consider agency beyond the dichotomy of compliance and resistance and bear in mind that “Girls’ gendered agency is practiced within normative social, economic and political processes of creating and reproducing gendered identity. The constraints of gender and normative femininity are therefore always a factor in its production, expression and resistance” (Gonick, Renold, Ringrose & Weems, 2009, p. 6).

Critical to my thinking about the practices the girls engaged in at school is cultural anthropologist Saba Mahmood’s theory of agency. Mahmood writes that the “notion of human

agency most often invoked by feminist scholars” is “one that located agency in the political and moral autonomy of the subject” (Mahmood, 2005, p. 7). She suggests that as feminist researchers we may be consumed with the pursuit of evidence of resistance to male oppression. Instead, Mahmood invites us to think of agency “not simply as a synonym for resistance to social norms, but as a modality of action” (Mahmood, 2005, p. 157). In this mode of analysis agency might be understood as “the capacity to realize one’s own interests against the weight of custom, tradition, transcendental will, or other obstacles” (Mahmood, 2005, p. 8). Perhaps most useful for my analysis here is her statement that “the meaning and sense of agency cannot be fixed in advance, but must emerge through an analysis of the particular concepts that enable specific modes of being, responsibility and effectivity” (Mahmood, 2005, p. 15).

Rosalind Gill points out that the proliferation and commodification of the term “girl power” is also relevant to the consideration of agency. Gill argues “we have to reformulate our ideas of agency in relation to dominant discourses whereby empowerment and ‘choice’ are appropriated and actually become a key ‘technology’ through which the self is lived, with oppressive effects” (Gill quoted in Ringrose, 2013, p. 66). In this sense, as others have argued, postfeminist ideology co-opts feminist ideals such as “choice” and “empowerment” and encourages women and girls to take those up under the neoliberal banner of individual responsibility and meritocracy (McRobbie, 2009). Claire Maxwell and Peter Aggleton (2010) assert that “much current research suggests that agency is usually evidenced in moments of (active) resistance or re-signification” (p. 330-331). In their review of current thinking around agency they note that the two most common frameworks for agency in feminist research are Judith Butler’s notion of performativity, and Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus and field. Maxwell and Aggleton argue that

researchers using these frameworks focus on similar points: “that agency must be contextualised; that everywhere there exist at least moments of agency; and that social class influences and constrains agentic possibilities” (Maxwell & Aggleton, 2010, p. 330). In their research on young women’s sexual relationships they suggest an alternative framework of “agency in action” (Maxwell & Aggleton, 2010). They describe their approach as beginning with “young women’s conceptualizations of power within relationships and traces the struggles in which they have participated, and the elements of radicalism in the agentic practice they display” (Maxwell & Aggleton, 2010, p. 341). Like Mahmood, their theory suggests an understanding of agency that is not determined in advance or one that deems particular behaviors as resistance.

As has been described in previous chapters, I observed the girls at FDMS to be living under an oppressive system that was perpetuated by essentialist gender stereotypes by the students, faculty and administrators. As participants in this system the girls were largely unaware of their own oppression and their actions do not reflect an attempt to challenge the systematic inequity they dealt with each day. Unlike much that is written about “girl power,” choice and agency, the girls at FDMS engaged in practices that “sent a message,” but did not necessarily empower them in a sustainable or constructive way. The choice, for example, to quietly or defiantly not participate in class did nothing to improve that girl’s relationship with her teachers or her academic performance. I suggest that the practices I observed the girls engaging in were agentic in nature, but rather than an attempt to subvert the dominant paradigms at the school these were aimed at communicating their displeasure with certain elements in the school environment and disrupting the status quo.

Willful non-participation: strategies for dealing with teachers

As discussed in earlier chapters, in order to gain social status at FDMS students acted outside of the norms of school behavior. The students with the most social status, primarily the boys, constantly roamed the hallways, were unprepared and caused disruptions in class. Girls at FDMS, with a few exceptions, were generally not as disruptive as the boys, but there were times when they chose to act outside the norms of accepted “female” school behavior. I have countless examples in my field notes of girls sitting at their desks not doing their work, not acting out or even talking, but just staring into space or putting their heads down. The issue of student disengagement from school is a serious one. Researchers have found that “most of the students who eventually dropped out [of high school] began disengaging from school long before” (Balfanz, Herzog & Iver, 2007, p. 224). School disengagement can be defined as “disconnecting from [school] norms and expectations, reducing effort and involvement at school, and withdrawing from a commitment to school and to school completion” (Balfanz, Herzog & Iver, 2007, p. 224). Despite Amelia, the Assistant Principal’s assertion that middle school students are “*young enough that there’s nobody who’s decided yet that school’s not for them*” (Interview, 4/3/14), student disengagement begins and/or escalates in the middle school years (Balfanz, Herzog & Iver, 2007; Bland, Carrington & Brady, 2009; Kennedy, 2011).

The willful non-participation the girls used in class to send messages that I am describing here is different than boredom. There are examples in my field notes of girls who were bored in class and chose other activities to focus on that were not related to the class work, such as illicitly looking at their phones, reading books from other classes or doodling and drawing. The intention and the outcome of behavior sparked by boredom is different from student

disengagement. Below I distinguish between two categories of non-participation I observed - quiet non-participation and defiant non-participation. Whether the girls at FDMS were motivated by consciously creating a discourse around inequity or beginning the process of disengagement, I think these events are important for several reasons. First, because the type of resistant behavior described here is most often attributed to boys. These examples counter the essentialist idea that “school behavior,” e.g. sitting still and paying attention, is “girl behavior.” Likewise, I have recorded several examples of girls’ non-participation being completely unnoticed by the teacher whereas boys’ non-participation or acting out almost always receives attention. Girls also put themselves at risk for failure when they choose not to participate in class, take notes or follow along with the concepts being taught. This is a concern because research suggests that “experiencing a course failure in the middle grades would also be a strong predictor of eventually dropping out” (Balfanz, Herzog & Iver, 2007, p. 224). I observed two types of willful non-participation, quiet non-participation, in which a girl would refuse all interaction with teachers and other students usually fading into the background, and defiant non-participation, in which a girl would silently defy the teacher commanding the attention of the teachers and other students in the classroom. These are discussed in detail below.

Quiet non-participation

When I asked one sixth grade teacher what he thought the biggest issue for girls at FDMS was, he said:

My first answer, I don't know if it's my best answer, would be the risk of being underserved just because the girls, I think, are more likely to fly under the radar, like low academic students who are female are sort of hiding and just sitting back and not saying

much and then it's the squeaky wheel that gets the grease. Umm, I think that's probably the biggest danger. They're just like uncomfortable about speaking up. They don't act out behaviorally so they are not getting attention that way and it's easy to miss them. It happens much less with boys like I had maybe one or two boys last year who were like that but several girls. (Interview, 1/16/14)

Other teachers acknowledged that they were aware of girls who I labeled the “quiet non-participants” and they had a range of ideas about what was happening with those students. For example, when I asked Jade, a seventh grade English Language Arts (ELA) teacher, about the “quiet non-participating” girls I had noticed, she responded: “*We have a lot of those here, this is the house for that*” (Interview, 2/26/14). When I asked her if she could suggest possible reasons for this behavior she said:

Because there is thirty-three people in the class and they can get away with it. That's why. There is thirty three people in the class and within that thirty three we have that culture of, I can talk to the teachers however I want. I don't have to do this, everything is all vague and subjective. So, hey, the teachers have to fight with the a-holes all day long, that the little invisible girl can keep being invisible, and she or he will do that as long as they can. (Interview, 2/26/14)

Other teachers thought it was more about the students themselves than class size or the culture of the school. Shannon, an eighth grade math teacher, told me: “*If it's [school work] easy to them, they'll do it, but if it just seems so hard the first time, they won't give it a chance or anything, they'll just shut down completely*” (Interview, 1/23/14). April, a seventh grade special education, teacher noted: “*I think something else is occupying their brain space, than school.*

Like they, something is significantly more important and like whatever the task is, doesn't matter if it is hard or not" (Interview, 2/7/14). Larry, an eighth grade science teacher, agreed: *"I think actually in some cases they are distracted by other things going on. So when you're thirteen it's more important to know what happened last night than doing new science work"* (Interview, 1/30/14). Still, other teachers suggested that it had more to do with the girls' personalities than other distractions. Jodie, a sixth grade ELA teacher, told me:

I do see them just completely shut down. Like when we are in the meeting area I have a couple of girls who just don't participate. Even if I call on them like you have to participate, she will speak but very softly so we can hardly hear her. But there are definitely a couple of girls who, not so much in my morning class but in my afternoon class who just never, ever speak up in class. They will do the work that is assigned but will never participate unless they are called on and then they will turn bright red before they can answer a question. I guess self-conscious and super shy. (Interview, 2/13/14)

A few teachers suggested the behavior might be related to issues in the girls' home environment. Only one teacher asserted that it might be related to classroom pedagogy or that a teacher might be able to better incorporate a quiet non-participator. Michael said: *"This is something that's true everywhere; you know there's a lot of literature written about this. You know kids who will just become part of the woodwork, but more often with girls and this, of course, is part of being a better teacher is devising lessons where they can't do that"* (Interview, 1/29/14). However other teachers felt like the overall structure of the middle school experience in general was just not conducive to early adolescents - girls or boys. April, a seventh grade special education teacher, said: *"Personally I say this all the time, I think middle school boys and girls need not to be in school. They should be like on a farm, or on a boat doing something hands on. I've learned that*

by doing significantly hands on activities in the class because the kids who drove me crazy last year are suddenly like creating these amazing things” (Interview, 2/7/14). Only Michael and April suggested that the girls might be sending a message to the teacher about the quality of the lesson or the pedagogy of the school. This idea is supported by research in which students themselves told researchers that teachers and their pedagogical practice made a big difference in their level of engagement (Bland, Carrington & Brady, 2009). Jade argues that the girls are doing it as an intentional form of misbehavior or statement of independence just to see how long they can get away with it. Taken together, the teachers’ comments reveal that whether the girls were just shy, bored by the lesson or doing it just because they can, as Jade suggested, the girls were making a choice not to participate. The teachers also uniformly acknowledged that it was an issue in the school, and that those were the girls who were most likely to be underserved by the teachers.

In my field notes there are multiple instances of girls in every grade, in a variety of subjects with teachers of different genders not doing even the simplest task, such as copying notes from the front of the room or completing a page in a packet with the assistance of table-mates. For example:

Jayla and her friend are talking quietly and Larry, the teacher, never comes over to check their notes which are incomplete. Sally (at their table) seems to be getting it all down so maybe they think they’ll copy from her?

(Field notes, 1/9/14)

Aisha tells Brad, a substitute, that Larry, the teacher, doesn't care if she does her packet or not.

(Field notes, 1/16/14)

While this might appear at the outset as a minor issue or an issue of laziness or insecurity on the part of the girls, I argue that it is a serious concern. For many girls this was their constant state of being in class. In the example below Aisha, an eighth grader, is so used to being disengaged in class that even when she is given individual attention by the teacher, she refuses to participate.

Aisha sitting in class in the back of the room. She's very quiet so she almost never gets any attention. They are making paper planes and seeing if they can land them in one specific spot in the room. Aisha has someone else make her plane and doesn't get up to throw her plane. Larry, the teacher, tries, but he can't make her.

(Field notes, 1/30/14)

In this example Aisha was being asked to make and throw a paper airplane which was not difficult and some students even thought was fun. It is clear that it is not the task itself that is daunting but the idea of engaging in class at all.

Another example from my field notes that stands out took place in an eighth grade math class. This very disruptive class was split in half with the special education teacher taking half the students into one room and the general education teacher keeping the other half in her room in an attempt to maintain order. Additionally, because of the number of difficult students in the class, Bill, the Director of Culture and Character, comes in to observe. He attempts to help the teacher by explaining an alternate strategy to help students solve the algebraic equation. As part of this process he asks one of the female students, Cyndy: *"Some number plus one equals seven, what is*

that number?” She does not respond. He waits. She stares right at him, but does not say a word. Finally another exasperated student calls out “six” (Field notes, 1/16/14). I do not believe that the student did not know the answer to the question. The class had been reduced to about ten students so she couldn’t get away with not following along or paying attention. Bill singled her out for this easy question to build her confidence and to allow her to contribute to the classroom conversation. I think of this incident in tandem with some information that Sophia, one of the paraprofessionals, shared with me. One day in the cafeteria Sophia called me over saying she had “information” for me. She had recently learned about the nature of my research and had been interviewed about her ideas of girls’ experiences at FDMS with another paraprofessional. She then tells me that she spoke to Katherine and asked her why she is so quiet in class. Katherine said it’s because she’s afraid if she speaks out she’ll become a target for boys and she doesn’t want to put herself in that position. She says she knows she’s smart, but she still thinks the boys will make fun of her (Field notes, 2/4/14). Did Cyndy also feel that not responding to the question “What number plus one equals seven?” would put her in a better position than answering?

To emphasize the extent girls were willing to go to in order to not participate, I am including here a record I kept from my field notes of the actions of one particular seventh grade girl - a serial quiet non-participator - in one class period. Cammie was a skinny Latina girl who always wore her coat and often kept her hood up. She was very pleasant, spoke with me often - sometimes even coming to sit with me in the library and do homework in lieu of going to class - and had a few close friends. I knew that she was often late to school because she had to take her younger brother and sister to school in the mornings. I also knew that her older brother was in a

juvenile detention center. The record below took place in her social studies class in which there were two teachers, a paraprofessional, five very difficult to manage boys, and Diamond, labeled by one of the two teachers as the school's "biggest disciplinary problem."

Cammie has a hood up, her coat on and her backpack on. She has her binder in front of her, but waits until Lippo, the teacher, chides her into opening it before starting her work.

9:31 am Cammie has a blank piece of paper and she is just sitting there.

9:38 am Lippo organizes Cammie's papers for her and then asks another student to give her something to write with. Lippo walks away and she goes back to sitting still and not doing anything.

9:45 am – Cammie has folded up her loose leaf and continues to sit still not doing anything.

9:50 am – Lippo talks to Cammie encouraging her to work, he walks away and she puts her hands back in her pockets. Sophia, the para professional, goes over to her and asks her why she hasn't done anything. She points out that Cammie has wasted the whole period.

9:55 am – Cammie smiling walks over to Sophia who says "you really don't have a pencil in there?" meaning her backpack. I reach in my bag and hand her a pen and say "why didn't you ask me earlier?" Sophia nods. Cammie smiles and goes back to her seat. However, she is not writing when I next look over at her.

10:00 am – Lippo has them clean up. Cammie has done nothing

(Field notes, 3/5/14)

It's possible that Cammie may have been dealing with issues at home that impacted her work at school. However, she excitedly shared with me not long after this incident was recorded that her family was getting a puppy and she often spoke of them in a positive way. Cammie was a capable and engaging person who clearly could have completed the work if she had chosen to. I suggest that she engaged in non-participatory behavior in order to send a message. The message could have been about an unhappy home life, a dissatisfaction with the chaos in the class or a statement of independence from the teacher's expectations.

In the focus groups I asked the girls what they thought might be going on with girls who engaged in this practice. I wondered if they would be sympathetic to them or if they would even be aware of what I was talking about. Keisha, a seventh grader, told me "*you know how the boys are in charge? So it could be that they [the girls] have a bad boyfriend and they are like trying to follow his lead*" (Focus group, 2/5/14). The other girls agreed that they could just be trying to "act cool." This assessment is certainly in line with what I knew to be true of the social hierarchy in the school. In another focus group I had this exchange with two sixth grade girls:

G1: Those are the kind of girls I hate.

G2: Yeah. I don't like them either.

Susan McCullough(SM): Why?

G1: Those are like the two girls that sit next to me, they are just talking and then they'll stare into space. They're just like oh...

SM: But why do you hate them though?

G1: Because they're so annoying I mean they look up in space and just get away from the earth right and then when they're back from la la land they be like what are we supposed to know and I'll just be like we're you two listening?

SM: Oh, because then they ask you. ..

G1: I mean, I'm not going to tell you, you can ask the teacher... Or then sometimes when I don't want to tell them the answer they try to copy off my work.

G2: Exactly.

(Focus group, 1/22/14)

The girls are acknowledging that the quiet non-participants are acting outside of the expected classroom behavior for girls. They describe the behavior as “annoying” which is surprising until they clarify that it is annoying to be asked to what to do when the quiet non-participant needs to know what is going on in class. While the girls at FDMS were typically helpful in situations in which a classmate might need a pencil or a sheet of paper or even to review directions, that kindness does not apply in this specific situation. The girls in the focus group almost sound resentful towards other girls who have not paid attention, they “hate them” and have no interest in helping them.

Defiant non-participation

Defiant non-participation happened when girls for whatever reason refused to do what the teacher asked. In these instances the girls are not fading into the background or going unnoticed by the teacher. Most examples of defiant non-participation require the teacher and usually other students to notice the girl's behavior. I refer to it as “non-participation” because the girl does not

engage with the teacher - does not talk, argue or yell, does not leave the room - she simply does not do what is asked. Here's one example from a sixth grade science class:

Nyah told to move for talking and she doesn't. She and Michael have a standoff which involves her just staring at her desk and not moving. Michael ends it saying he'll talk to her mother. Pie goes over to talk to her privately.

(Field notes, 2/10/14)

The issue of respect is one that came up with a few teachers when discussing defiant non-participants. Teachers seemed to understand that for some girls respect was an imperative and dealing with those girls in what they perceived as a respectful manner was paramount in staying off and diffusing classroom standoffs. The teachers' ability to diffuse the situation by retaining their authority but by demonstrating respect for the girl determines whether or not the girl will re-join the class and participate and whether or not her time in class will be spent in a mental and emotional stand off with the teacher. Here is another example from my field notes:

Later there is a confrontation with Nyah and Pie, a teacher, takes her paper, crumples it up and says "now you get a zero for the day." Nyah then can't do any of the work for the day. Michael has to speak to her also and specifically says: "I am trying to give you respect but it's you who are being disrespectful."

(Field notes, 3/10/14)

While no girl ever explicitly told me that getting respect from a teacher was important to her, it was clear by the actions of many girls that it was. This is unsurprising and also consistent with research on what students believe makes a good teacher (Kennedy, 2011). Barack, an eighth grade paraprofessional, explained it in this way: "*they prefer to be eased into what they have to*

do so if you can kindly talk to a student as a teacher, as an adult, you get a better response out of them” (Interview, 3/27/14).

Defiant non-participation often occurs when the girls are reprimanded for their behavior, but also sometimes when they feel they were overlooked or even when they receive a bad grade. Some examples of this are:

Alicia, seventh grader, comes back upset because she got a drink, came back to “check on what’s going on” in the classroom and Marc took the pass from her so someone else could go. She walks slowly to her desk and explains to me and then Marc that she needs to use the bathroom and she didn’t get the chance to. Marc tells her to hold it so she pretty much disengages with class. (Field notes, 12/11/13)

The girls I asked about this behavior felt that defiant non-participation may also be enacted to elevate social statuses of the non-participator. Annie, a seventh grader, told me “*because all the cool kids are like, ‘whatever I don’t care about homework ‘cause I’m so cool’” (Interview, 5/30/14).* Again underscoring that at FDMS acting against norms of good school behavior was the path to popularity. In terms of the “defiant non-participating girl” Jade, a seventh grade ELA, had this to say:

Because they feel like how dare you reprimand them, it's attitude, it's the culture of the school. How dare you reprimand me teacher, that's not your job. No, it is my job. So when you create that micro culture in your class, because I rarely get the attitude response and then they do nothing. So, it's about the culture that you foster in your class. (Interview, 2/26/14)

Jade felt that, while the quiet non-participating girl was about what she perceived to be the lax culture of the school, the defiant non-participating girl was a function of the culture of each individual classroom. That is, if a teacher would not stand for the defiant behavior, it would not be present in the classroom. Based on my observations I share Jade's assessment that the practice of defiant non-participation was at least in part dependent on the culture of the individual classroom or the pedagogy of the teacher. I often observed girls who would be very defiant in one classroom, refusing to switch seats when asked or work in a group with their table-mates, but limit their defiance to eye-rolling in another class. Jade and other teachers' idea that part of the issue might have to do with the culture of the school, which was not as academically focused as some of the teachers thought it should be, is consistent with Balfanz, Herzog & Iver's (2007) recommendation for reforming middle schools and making them "more academically excellent" as a strategy for high academic achievement and student engagement (p. 223).

It is useful here to return to Mahmood and her assessment of Judith Butler's notion of performativity in relation to agency. Mahmood reminds us that "Butler's conception of performativity is also at the core of her theory of agency" (Mahmood, 2013, p. 162). She goes on to explain that the repetitive nature of performativity is both what "makes the structure of norms stable" and "makes the structure susceptible to change and resignification" (Mahmood, 2013, p. 162). I am not interpreting non-participation here as a conscious act of liberatory feminist resistance. I am also not suggesting that boys do not utilize the same strategy on occasion. I am suggesting that particularly in light of so many girls' assertion that teachers viewed them as more "mature" and "responsible" than the boys (which ultimately earned them

nothing other than fewer detentions) that non-participation was a meaningful act intended to communicate dissatisfaction to the classroom teacher. In their study on African-American middle school girls who were labeled as “trouble makers,” Murphy, Acosta and Kennedy-Lewis (2013) found that educators had put their research participants “in a position where they must assume the role of self-advocate as a way to reject inequitable treatment and assert their presence” (2013, p. 599). They go on to state: “Empowerment is essential to the development of African American adolescent girls (Collins, 2000) and is inherent in the socialization patterns through which Black families groom their daughters (Lewis, 1975; O’Connor et al. 2005)” (Murphy, Acosta & Kennedy-Lewis, 2013, p. 599). Although I saw non-participation happening across all three grades in every subject area, it was most prevalent when the teachers were forced to spend a great deal of time disciplining disruptive students, usually boys, when the chaos in those classes was at such a high level that it was safe to assume non-participation would not be noticed and when classes moved at a slow pace and were teacher-centered. It is also true in some cases that girls who were non-participants in one classroom may be full participants in another, whereas some girls were serial non-participants. This is consistent with what Murphy, Acosta and Kennedy-Lewis found in their study. They note that “students are not indiscriminate in their noncompliance, but rather differentiate their behavior depending on their relationship with individual educators” (Murphy, Acosta & Kennedy-Lewis, 2013, p. 605). In his research on student boredom, Richard Mora found that often students’ resistance to class “was not defiance undertaken for the sole purpose of challenging teachers” (Mora, p. 5, 2011). Instead he suggests that “the students’ resistance should be considered from Abowitz’s (2000) theoretical perspective which defines resistance as ‘communication; that is, a means of signaling and constructing new meanings, and of building a discourse around particular problems of exclusion

or inequality' (p. 877)" (Mora, p. 5, 2011). Whether agentic or not, I would argue that the high percentage of non-participating girls at FDMS were definitely attempting to send a message to the teachers about their pedagogy, chaos in the classroom, gendered expectations or respect.

Controlling the Narrative: strategies for creating school reputations

Perhaps more consciously agentic than non-participation in the classroom was what I saw as the girls' ongoing attempt to control the narrative that was constantly in the process of being created about them at the school. Obviously gossip was one way in which narratives were being created and altered at school everyday. Gossip is explored extensively in Chapter Four. But, the creation and dissemination of gossip was out of the control of the girls. They could control what they contributed, if they did, but they could not control what was said about them. Also, the girls acknowledged that truth meant little to them in terms of the gossip. Gossip to them was more like a soap opera - they wanted it to be entertaining and "juicy;" whether it was actually based in reality did not matter. However, I assert here that I saw several instances of girls actively working on their personal narratives. This took the form of girls publicly introducing language or ideas in reference to themselves or their actions that I believe they wanted to become part of their narrative. It is understood that "school settings provide the social opportunities for adolescents to demonstrate their chosen identities, to develop and maintain their reputations, and to signify their memberships in particular adolescent groups through their behavior" (Lee & Smith-Adcock, 2005, p. 79). For many girls working on their chosen identities was an important pursuit.

Controlling the narrative with teachers

The concept of girls wanting to control the narrative about their own experiences at school can probably best be exemplified in this excerpt from my field notes. The incident takes place during a seventh grade English Language Arts (ELA) class and involves Diamond, whose identity and reputation are discussed at length in Chapter Five and Jade, the teacher, who is African-American and in her mid 30s. Jade and Diamond tend to have a dramatic relationship, yelling at each other often, but it is clear that Diamond craves Jade's attention and approval. Jade is usually able to manage Diamond in the classroom, believes in her academic abilities and is supportive of her in general. The following incident occurred during an in-class work session:

Diamond pulls up a chair right to Jade's table and they immediately get into it. Jade is being very real with Diamond and accusing her of not being kind and not being helpful in her community. Diamond is back talking the whole time. At one point Jade says "check the suspension record" and Diamond responds that every time she got suspended except the last time was racist. Jade is like "what? excuse me?"

While they argue Diamond takes out her class photograph and starts drawing all over it with pen. (Field notes, 12/11/13)

This incident was noteworthy for several reasons. First, I believe that Diamond was clearly trying on the concept of racism as a component of her behavioral record, curious to see what Jade's reaction would be. As has been noted previously, Diamond was the most disruptive student in the middle school. In my observation, her behavior was so difficult for the teachers to manage that they did a commendable job in choosing which infractions to address and which to ignore. While research shows that African-American girls are punished more frequently than

their white peers, FDMS's pride and investment in the perceived diversity of the school makes it difficult to believe that Diamond had fallen victim to this practice (Crenshaw, 2015). Secondly, in my observation racism as a concept was never discussed in the school between students. While their African-American and Latino/a identities were important to the students and were referenced and discussed casually in conversations, I never overheard students discussing racism in any capacity. In fact, teachers confirmed for me that while students may have had personal experiences with racism most students had no historical knowledge of racism in the United States. Shannon, an eighth grade math teacher, described to me that students were "shocked" when they learned that before segregation white and African-American children were forced to attend separate schools. I had never witnessed Diamond drawing on these ideas before to talk about her life or life experiences. This incident occurred near the end of the school year when Diamond seemed to be working much harder to control herself and participate productively in school. I suggest that her drawing on her class picture with a pen is her reaction to Jade's disbelief at her attempt to label her suspensions as racist and reveals her disappointment that Jade is unwilling to support her idea.

A similar incident occurred with Alicia. This incident took place in a seventh grade social studies class. Unlike Jade's ELA class, Lippo and Marc's social studies class tends to be chaotic. There are several students who are difficult to manage and Marc and Lippo have a less commanding presence than Jade. They struggle to keep the students' attention and generally end up moving through the room addressing the students in small groups. On this particular day, Alicia had been reprimanded for talking and not doing her work several times. Lippo had

threatened to call Alicia's mother to report on her behavior that day. After Lippo walked away Alicia and Marc have the following exchange:

Alicia asks Marc why she is on everybody's radar (he's just at her table trying to check her Do Now) and then before he can respond she says it's because "I'm aggressive."

Sophia (para) looks over and rolls her eyes. (Field notes, 12/11/13)

Alicia had been reprimanded very explicitly several times that day for talking. Though I acknowledge that her personality in general could be described as aggressive at times, this was in no way a factor in how she was being treated in class. Sophia's reaction - which is akin to Jade's reaction to Diamond - supports my assertion that issues of aggression played no part in Alicia's class experience that day. I talked to Alicia fairly frequently and participated in conversations she had with her closest friend, Mercedes. I had never heard them use the word aggressive before, let alone use it to describe themselves or other's perception of them. Like Diamond, I would argue that Alicia was trying this word on, not only to see if it would change how the adults in the room were dealing with her, but also how they would react to it in general, to see if it would become part of her narrative.

Another example involves an entire class of girls. This incident took place in a single gender art class with Lila, who was primarily a high school teacher, but who rotated through the elective cycles to occasionally offer art to the middle school. Lila had asked the girls to take turns reading a text out loud. The girls were very resistant, few volunteered and they complained throughout the activity and made fun of one another while they were reading. One of Lila's pedagogical and management strategies is to ask the girls why they think they are engaged in the

activity. At a certain point she stops the reading and offers the girls an opportunity to reflect on the read aloud activity. This is from my field notes:

Interestingly when Lila asks them why they are doing this activity (of reading out loud) everyone wants to volunteer their ideas and talk about why they might be doing what they are doing. Also, they want to talk about how they could do the reading better when they do it again tomorrow.

I mention this to Lila after class and she says they are hypocrites. (Field notes, 1/9/14)

In this instance I believe that the girls like Lila. They want the narrative of the class to be that they participate because they like her and she likes them. In reality, it is always difficult to get the girls focused at the beginning of class, though when they are making art and allowed to talk, the girls truly do seem to enjoy the class. They are attempting to demonstrate to Lila that even though they were difficult during the activity, they are committed to the class. They do this by offering multiple comments to show they understood the purpose of the activity and attempt to show their investment in the class by giving suggestions about how the activity can more effectively be carried out when it is repeated tomorrow. In this way I would argue that they hope to change the narrative of the class experience and perhaps their reputation as a class. Lila shares with me that she thinks they are hypocrites because she believes that even if she alters the activity using their suggestions they will still be reluctant to participate.

Another example involving a seventh grade girl asserting responsibility for her academic performance within a classroom environment also takes place in Jade's English Language Arts (ELA) class.

During a circle discussion in ELA the teachers are “checking in” with the students and express their concern about some of the low grades in the class. The discussion is meant to be an opportunity to understand what areas the kids need help in. Portia says she didn’t think she was improving in English because she still “goofs around.”

(Field notes, 11/13/13)

Unlike some of the girls in school who tend to shut down when they are reprimanded or are handed back a bad grade, Portia seems willing to publicly take responsibility for her low grades by acknowledging that she is not working as hard as she should be. This is a phenomenon that I noticed with other girls in other classes. They seem all too ready to acknowledge that they did not do the work or were not prepared for class. Perhaps being a behavioral problem is preferable to being considered not smart enough to handle the work? Or perhaps acknowledging that they have not done their work ultimately gives them more status socially? In either case, Portia’s comment places the responsibility for her grade firmly in her hands - it is not an issue that requires assistance from the teachers. She will do better in ELA when she decides to stop “goofing around.”

Controlling the narrative with peers

The role of gossip in relational aggression and the resulting fights that ensued between girls is discussed in Chapter Four. As noted, girls were quick to argue and even engage in physical fights over miscommunications. In arguments they were always eager to clarify what they had said if they felt it was being misrepresented or to clarify the intentions behind the meaning of what they had said. These attempts did not always work to subvert fighting between girls. Imani, a seventh grader, agreed that some girls took comments about themselves too seriously. She told

me: *“Someone said this, someone said that. He said, she said – they’ll fight over that. The girls in general because they’ll take it personal and guys will be like ‘ha-ha-ha, that’s funny’”*

(Interview, 5/29/14). Imani is acknowledging that it is much more difficult for the girls to let a comment or miscommunication slide. Whereas a boy might be able to laugh it off, for girls, these comments were deeply personal. The extent to which this was critical for the girls is exemplified in this comment by April, a seventh grade special education teacher. She said: *“And girls, when you try to talk to them about like something they said to another person, that takes a long time for them to own up that they were wrong because in their minds they have already rationalized that, well this person said this, so I was allowed to say this”* (Interview, 2/7/14). It was essential for the girls to be clear in what was said about them because this was their best weapon for preparing their retaliation and explaining their actions. For these reasons I believe it was much more difficult for girls to control the narrative with their peers, especially with those girls who were outside of their friendship networks.

Keisha, a seventh grader, shared an example of the importance of correcting miscommunication in her story of a fight with another girl that caused her to be suspended from school for two days. The fight escalated due in part to the other girl telling Keisha to stop bothering Marisa, another seventh grade girl. Concerned with the factual incorrectness of this request, Keisha explained to me:

I never used to talk to Marisa because we already had an argument before, so we left each other alone so she’s saying that I always bothered her – I never bothered her, if I don’t like you, why am I going to bother you and waste my time and keep bothering you and this and that like? So we just left each other alone. (Interview, 5/21/14)

Keisha readily told me about the fight and why she got into it and also explained to me the behavioral problems she had in sixth grade. She was not trying to make herself look good or innocent in describing this scene to me. More important to her was the accuracy of the accusation as she saw it. She knew the extent to which she was responsible for the fight and why it occurred, but it was important to her to clarify her relationship with Marisa as well.

The boys' perception was also of deep importance to some girls. As Mercedes, a seventh grader, explained to me:

I know lots of girls here they get boyfriends early and stuff, like they worry about what boys have to think of them. Like, you come to school to learn and I notice that lots of girls they only care about what their hair looks like or ... what a boy thinks of them and it's kind of annoying to be frank. (Interview, 5/22/14)

This suggests that another reason girls may spend time trying to control the narrative with their peers is to be attractive to the boys. Here is an example from my field notes:

Malik is telling a story about how Gizela (a popular 8th grader) said "Hi" and Carly said "Are you talking to me?" and Gizela said: "No, I'm not talking to you, I'm talking to him." And then acts out how Carly looked down in a sad way. Carly says quietly "That's not what happened." Both Clay and Malik guffaw. (Field notes, 1/16/14)

A more typical reaction to teasing, especially for eighth graders at FDMS, would be to yell at the teaser, make fun of or even hit him or her. Carly was surely embarrassed to have Malik witness her believing that a popular girl had spoken to her and being incorrect. More important to her in this particular instance than making fun of him in return is to explain to Clay that Malik is wrong

and to re-interpret what took place. Malik's version of the story makes her look unpopular and therefore unattractive, and she is anxious to change that.

Keeping Up With the Narrative

Lastly, for many girls controlling the narrative meant being aware of what was spinning in the rumor mill and possibly contributing to it. In order to do this they needed to spend time communicating with their friends and in the bathroom reading what was on the walls and, at times, writing on the walls. There were some students who went to the bathroom during every period. The girls in the focus group confirmed for me that frequent bathroom visits were for the purposes of keeping up with the gossip. Daniela, a sixth grader, told me: *"People, they just go to the bathroom to write like, write something on the wall and spread rumors, yeah like gossip 'cause like I said like, people just want to spread it out"* (Focus group, 1/22/14). Kiymani, a sixth grader, agreed. She said that girls who left class frequently to go to the bathroom were likely thinking: *"I'm just going to go to the bathroom, probably do some wall writing or just play with my phone"* (Focus group, 1/22/14).

As has been discussed, knowing what was going on in terms of the gossip at FDMS was very important to the girls. They had limited options for controlling what was said about them and how they were perceived socially at the school. Successful or not, some girls at FDMS demonstrated agency by attempting to take control of the narratives that were being created about them.

Postfeminist practice at FDMS

As opposed to other agentic practices in which girls made choices about whether they would participate in class, defy the teacher, or attempt to take control of the narrative being created around their experience at FDMS, the postfeminist practices I saw at FDMS were carried out more by necessity. In order to rectify their assumption of gender equality with their experiences and some of the policies at FDMS, the girls engaged in discourse that embraced tenets of postfeminism, such as individual responsibility and “disinvestment and disavowals of feminist thinking” (Ringrose, 2013, p. 57). Postfeminist ideology acted to obscure the sexist practices that were present at the school such as the gender essentialist policies and the ongoing verbal and physical harassment from the boys. I argue that girls responded by adopting their own postfeminist attitude and practice.

I am defining postfeminist practice as those actions which reflect the tenets of postfeminist ideology. There are two consistent tenets of postfeminist ideology that are critical to my argument here. First, postfeminism is not simply the label for the “fourth” wave of feminism. It is an ideology opposed to core feminist ideals and can be understood as a “backlash” to feminist activism (McRobbie, 2009; Gill, 2008; Showden, 2009). Postfeminists believe that while historical versions of the women’s movement may have served a purpose, feminism is outmoded now. Secondly, postfeminism is actively apolitical. It focuses on the achievements of the individual and reifies the idea of meritocracy. Because of this, collective actions and advocacy around women’s issue are considered unnecessary and irrelevant (Showden, 2009). Postfeminist business icon, Facebook Chief Operating Officer and author of *Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead*, Sheryl Sandberg claims that the problem with feminism is “much too much of the conversation is on blaming others, and not enough is on taking responsibility ourselves”

(Auletta, 2011, p. 60). Her comments highlight a central component of postfeminist ideology which works on the assumption that because legislative protections against gender-based discrimination are in place, women and girls are free to make choices in their lives and that the same opportunities exist for all. A *feminist* practice might suggest that the girls would work together to identify issues of gender injustice in their school and then collectively approach the institution to address the systemic way that gender injustice was being perpetuated at their school - perhaps demanding that the school implement more programs and opportunities for girls. A *postfeminist* practice calls on girls to assume gender equity and resolve any school-based problems or issues they may have on their own. As political scientist Carisa Showden explains, postfeminism asserts: “There is little need for collective action – and the sacrifice that comes with it – when all that is left to achieve is a proper psychological orientation toward one’s own political and economic opportunities” (Showden, 2009, p. 174).

The girls at FDMS were required to rectify the institutional context of a self-professed “progressive” school where they were encouraged to share their thoughts and feelings and put trust in the adults at the school with their daily experiences of being harassed and dominated by the boys while teachers looked the other way. As I will describe below, rather than attempt to organize or seek support from the school or teachers against the constant harassment from the boys, the girls created their own individual strategies to deal with harassment.

I am not suggesting that the girls understood their actions to be postfeminist or that they were actively rejecting feminism through their language or actions. Mahmood reminds us “that to analyze people’s actions in terms of realized or frustrated attempts at social transformation is

necessarily to reduce the heterogeneity of life to the rather flat narrative of succumbing to or resisting relations of domination” (Mahmood, 2005, 174). As such it is probably most useful to analyze the girls’ actions in the context of the school environment and the dominant social norms at work there.

“Sexism isn’t that big of an issue here:” Girls’ understanding of gender equality

Most people would say girls trying to play sports with guys, no. We have a bunch of guys playing sports with girls, people request girls playing sports with them. There’s not really much of an issue. ... Sexism isn’t that big of an issue here. ... We all play sports together, we all do that together.

Imani, seventh grader (Interview, 5/29/14)

Jessica Ringrose asserts that certain notions can be read as postfeminist because “they have emerged in a trail of assumptions about gender equality in society” (Ringrose 2013, p. 57). I would argue that Imani’s comments here can be interpreted as postfeminist for that same reason. Imani has identified one area in which she believes gender inequality would be highlighted, sports, and clarified that not only do girls at FDMS play sports but that they play with boys and that “people,” which in this case likely refers to boys, “request” to play sports with girls. Imani’s response to the question: “Do you feel that everyone is treated equally at FDMS?” suggests that she has not considered gender equity as a school-wide concern, but rather compartmentalized it into the subject of sports. In this comment she has also given the control over whether or not girls are willingly included in sports to the boys. She believes that there is gender equality at

FDMS because the boys have *agreed* to play with the girls. Interestingly Imani's comments are made in the school context where physical education (PE) is one of the single gender classes because, as the Assistant Principal noted, in PE: "*A lot of times in middle school you see a point where boys run around and girls sit on the sidelines*" (Interview, 4/3/14). The Director of Culture and Character also stated: "*Quite a number of females didn't feel comfortable engaging in physical activity with the boys around*" (Interview, 5/27/14). The school's decision to separate boys and girls in PE rather than address the issue of why girls do not feel comfortable in PE or work on helping the girls to feel more comfortable explains in part Imani's use of co-ed sports as an example of gender equity in the school. It also reinforces the postfeminist nature of her comments. Rather than looking towards the institution to address issues around how boys and girls play together in PE, individual girls must assert themselves as "comfortable" with sports hoping they will receive the affirmation of, and be allowed to play with the boys.

Teachers concurred that many of the girls at FDMS did not have a good understanding of what gender equity was. In fact, some teachers were explicit in saying that girls were aiming low in their aspirations as though they didn't understand opportunities that were available to them as young women. Lippo, a seventh grade social studies teacher, says:

I listen to what some of the girls say and some of them indeed say things that are a little bit associated with girls growing up not in 2014 but you know, like in 1914 like they think "oh well, I'm going to get married, it's going to be great, I'm going to have this many kids." (Interview, 1/16/14)

This comment calls to mind postfeminist ideology's firm roots in heteronormativity. Cultural media critics often note that this emphasis on heteronormativity manifests itself in media

representations of young professional women who are consumed by women's role in creating and sustaining traditional families, and by a focus on what single, career women are "missing" (Showden, 2009; Taylor, 2012). Other ways in which the girls at FDMS embraced traditional roles are discussed in Chapter Five.

Teachers also described the way in which girls and boys understood that they were expected to talk of gender equity, but did not actually embrace it in classroom interactions. Jodie, a sixth grade Crew teacher and an ELA teacher, described a session in Crew in which they had discussed the issue of gender equity. She told me:

We just had, I think it was last week, had this circle on gender and they were just, you know the majority of them were like, that's not right. If a boy wants to wear pink they can wear whatever he wants. They were talking about how the media really shows that you how boys are supposed to be this way and girls are supposed to be this way. And they were talking about, they talk a good game like "that's not fair." But I still think there is part of them that is still buying into that. I was just giving out index cards for kids to write their goals on and one boy picked pink and they were like "ahh." Even though they said it was fine, it's o.k. for a boy to like pink. So they still, they say things but their actions are still like caught up in it. (Interview, 2/13/14)

Jade, a seventh grade ELA teacher, agreed with me when I told her that I thought the girls knew what they were supposed to say when I asked them about gender equity in the school. She encouraged me to ask a range of other questions that might do a better job of revealing their true ideas on the subject. Jade said that because she has a different, closer relationship with many of the girls she would ask questions like "Do you think it's ok for the girl to buy condoms?"

(Interview, 2/26/14). Jade asserted: *“If I ask those typical questions [about gender equity] they will give you typical answers”* (Interview, 2/26/14). Both Jodie and Jade’s comments suggest that while girls understood that they were to show support for the idea of gender equity in practice, most girls had never been challenged to think critically about the concept of gender equity.

Finally, many teachers noted that for most of the girls their world was relatively small and that this perhaps might account for their inability to imagine a greater range of opportunities for themselves. Their social worlds consisted of school, family, friends and their neighborhoods. The teachers often commented, when asked what kind of programs they would like to see FDMS create for girls, that the girls needed exposure to women who had taken a variety of career paths to demonstrate a range of opportunity. Lippo, the seventh grade social studies teacher, told me *“I don’t think they have enough exposure to like, professional women, wealthy women, women who work in culture or the arts even women who have like regular straight 9 to 5 jobs”* (Interview, 1/16/14). Shannon, a seventh grade math teacher, felt that the girls should have exposure to the types of programs that had been available to her at her high school in Long Island. She described a program called “Women of the Future” that was geared towards *“knowing your self worth, building your self confidence”* (Interview, 1/23/14). Additionally as part of the program, Shannon told me that participants would *“go different places, they would see successful women, they would talk to successful women and [the successful women would] say that ‘yeah I came from where you came from and I am successful because I strive, I, you know, I did what I needed to do’”* (Interview, 1/23/14). Shannon believed it would be very valuable for the girls at FDMS to have this opportunity to *“see more successful women that look*

like them” (Interview, 1/23/14). All of these comments tie educational and economic success to being women who are “professional.” Sarai, the librarian, framed it another way. She explained that she was concerned with the way the girls at FDMS thought about their future and their lives:

[The girls] are not thinking big enough. Like a lack of creative, a lack of vision, a lack of like, what ifs. The imagination is just as really prescribed, it's very limited. And I feel like, I don't get the sense, not that the young women here don't have that capacity, but I don't see them as seeing themselves as being movers and shakers. (Interview, 3/27/14)

I argue that the girls at FDMS did not have, and were not being taught, to consider the concept of gender equity critically. While they ostensibly believed that boys and girls should be treated equally, there was a lack of ability to imagine what that might look like in practice, how they might identify injustice at school and how they might work to change it. The teachers saw this exemplified in classroom behavior in which boys and girls were made fun of for not acting in ways that fulfilled traditional gender expectations and also believed it to be exemplified in the limited roles the girls aspired to in their futures.

Being tough: Strategies for dealing with harassment

In her study on girl fighting in early adolescence, Brown found that girls were often “calculating and mean” to one another as a pathway to popularity (Brown, 2005, p. 110). Girls at FDMS were definitely mean to each other -- constantly including and excluding different girls from their social groups as they vied for a higher position in the middle school social hierarchy. This was standard behavior for many of the girls regardless of their roles in school as a smart, loud, funny, popular or quiet girl. But, I also noticed that at FDMS some girls worked to develop a

reputation as “tough” or conveyed a “don’t mess with me attitude” that was reserved for their interactions with the boys. Anita Harris argues that the expectation of the utilization of postfeminist practices by young women is a given in the 21st century. She explains that “new ideologies about individual responsibility and choices also dovetail with some broad feminist notions about opportunities for young women, making them the most likely candidates for performing a new kind of self-made subjectivity” (Harris, 2004, p. 6). I argue here that at FDMS self-made subjectivity manifested itself in the strong presence of the importance of individual responsibility and the creation of “tough” reputations for some girls as a protective measure against the boys.

Despite the fact that Mercedes, a seventh grader, told me that her favorite thing about FDMS was that she could share anything with the teachers and the teachers would respect and help her - “*Hardly none of the teachers I can never like keep a secret from –I can tell any teacher anything and they’ll help me with any problem I’m having, so that’s what I love about FDMS*” - she was adamant that telling a teacher that a boy was touching her or bothering her in class was “immature” (Interview, 5/22/14). She told me:

But like if it is in school like, I would yell, I’d be like “stop touching me” and then the teacher would hear and be like “Michael stop touching” something like that, and like that’s how I would tell. I wouldn’t be like “Jaaaaaaaade (makes simpering noises)” yeah, like that’s immature. (Interview, 5/22/14)

Other girls explained their strategies for staving off verbal and physical harassment from the boys. For example:

I just I threaten to smack them 'cause I grew up, I used to live with my cousins, they're all boys and we used to hang out like that. And if guys were into me I'd be like "Hell no, you need to step off or you're going to get perfume in your eyes." So yeah, like if a guy says something to me I'll just smack them in the back of the head.

Imani, seventh grader (Interview, 5/29/14)

But like boys know, a lot of the boys know in school not to touch me in any wrong way or something because like I will tell them something and if it escalates, you know, you know what else, and I've done it before and everybody knows that. Like it has happened before so lots of the boys know not to play around with me a lot.

Mercedes, seventh grader (Interview, 5/22/14)

Imani and Mercedes are describing their intimidating personalities. The boys understand that they should not talk to them aggressively as Imani describes or touch them in "any wrong way," as Mercedes says. If they do, these girls are willing to fight back. Imani mentions that she threatens to hit the boys and she has done such a good job of cultivating her intimidating presence that threats are enough to keep the boys from acting up with her. Mercedes references that she has "done it before," implying that she has gotten in an actual physical fight with a boy and presumably won or at least held her own. Mercedes states that she engages in this practice of defending herself against the boys because she doesn't want to be immature. Other girls described to me their concern that, if they tried to get assistance from a teacher, the boy who was bothering them would become angry. I had this conversation with Daniela, a sixth grader, in our interview:

D: I tell him "Stop, stop." But he fools around a lot with us 'cause like since we're right there and like sometimes it's uncomfortable for me 'cause I don't want him touching right, right [points to her chest...

Susan McCullough (SM): Yeah.

D: And like for Sarah (another girl in the class) it was kind of weird because he touched her right here [middle of breast bone] and she doesn't like it at all that's why she's, she's always hitting him 'cause like she doesn't like it when...

SM: Yeah. So wait, if you just tell him no that doesn't make a difference? I mean, does it make him stop?

D: Maybe because then 'cause like Sarah she would tell a teacher like 'cause she is like...

SM: She's not messing around.

D: Yeah. She's really like serious. She's serious about it, like she really is serious.

SM: Well, why wouldn't you tell a teacher?

D: [silence]

SM: If you don't like it and you can't make him stop....

D: Because I have a feeling that if I tell a teacher then they'll get mad at me and I don't want to ...

SM: That the teacher will get mad at you or that Manuel [the boy touching her] will get mad at you?

D: Manuel will get mad at me. Like, he's a really good friend but I mean like sometimes it gets....

SM: But it's weird because if he's your friend then it seems like if you said "stop it" that would stop it. But, no?

D: Mmm-mmm (negative)

SM: So, hmm, that's interesting 'cause it's like o.k. I get it. He thinks you're friends, he thinks it's funny but like if you say no or I saw Sarah hit him, you know like why, why doesn't, like he doesn't believe that you're serious?

D: 'Cause like he's kind of scared of Sarah 'cause like Sarah does some stuff to him, like she like, she would like kick him and she would get mad at him and she would step on his feet and she would step on his Jordans (expensive tennis shoes) and he loves his Jordans, so that's what's like his weakness so ... yeah. (Interview, 5/20/14)

Here Daniela is acknowledging that her friend Sarah has successfully, through physical violence, communicated to Manuel that she does not like it when he touches her. Sarah is not afraid to hit him, scuff up his new shoes or involve a teacher. Though Daniela has tried to communicate this through conversation, she has not been successful. She describes Sarah as "serious" about not wanting Manuel to bother her. I suggest that for Daniela "serious" in this situation means it is alright with Sarah if she and Manuel stop being friends because she will not stand for his harassment. Daniela seems more concerned about losing his friendship though she agrees Manuel is not being a good friend when he doesn't stop. Though Mercedes prided herself on having a tough reputation and not having to endure as much harassment as some of the other girls, when I described Daniela's situation she told me:

I'm in that situation right now too. Like where this boy keeps on poking me and grabbing onto my book bag and I'm just like "Leave me alone please." So I'm not talking to him because he thinks it's alright to say anything about me and anything to me and like he

told me he liked me already. And I'm like, like, I don't want to be mean because I know how it feels to like someone and they not like you back so I try not to be mean, but if you can't respect me of course I'm going to be mean. And he says, he like, he like thinks he can say anything because I'm trying to be nice to him and so I did tell him "I'm not talking to him because you're disrespecting me because I ask you to stop and you don't stop." And he thinks it's a game but.... (Interview, 5/22/14)

Because this boy has claimed to like Mercedes she is trying to be patient with him and not treat him the way she would treat a random harasser in the hallway. Still, she acknowledges that because she does not like him back he is disrespectful in what he says to her and about her. While this may seem like typical early adolescent behavior, Mercedes is clearly unhappy with the situation.

Mercedes and Imani both explained to me their conscious decision to cultivate an aggressive and fearless personality. Imani told me:

I figured it out in 5th grade because I used to get messed with and I'm like "Oh my God, just leave me alone." And I used to cry a lot and I'm like "Screw this I'm going to toughen up," so like sixth grade I took a whole year to figure out how to do it properly without being like a total bully and being a threat to everybody. I do it like, like playfully, but I'm serious but I just make it look like I'm joking. (Interview, 5/29/14)

Mercedes had a similar story focused on the transition between fifth and sixth grade and coming to FDMS. She said:

I kind of learned that when I came to this school that I had to be more tough because last year I couldn't just be like, I mean in elementary school I couldn't just be like "leave me

alone” out of nowhere and just become tough out of nowhere, so I knew that coming to this school that I had to become more tough so I became tough, like, more strong inside my heart and stuff like I became emotionally strong so I can stick up for myself.

(Interview, 5/22/14)

Annie, a seventh grader and one of the few white students in the school, shared with me that she was harassed a lot when she first came to FDMS. She explained that she was an “easy target” because she was white. When I asked her how she dealt with it she said:

It’s less so now ‘cause you know they’re used to me and I’m not an easy target because now I stick up for myself ‘cause like...I’ll just be like, I don’t know, I’ll say something not as like, not as racial, but I’ll just like say something back and they’ll just like stop, like they’ll just like walk away like o.k. (Interview, 5/30/14)

Imani reiterated the importance of standing up for yourself at the school saying: “*You have to make your place here and like, if no one understands where you’re coming from, and they’ll just walk all over you*” (Interview, 5/29/14).

Finally, Mercedes was clear with me that learning to be tough was something that every girl at FDMS should do. She understood that it did not come naturally to every girl, and even described her attempt to “toughen up” the little sisters of her friends. When I asked her what she would like to see FDMS do for the girls at the school, if any kind of program or resource could be introduced, she returned to this idea saying:

Take a tough teacher like Nadine [the gym teacher], like I think Nadine would be really good for this, take Nadine, put her in the class with a bunch of girls and make sure you tell them to stick up for yourself because you’re not going to get anywhere in life if you

have people taking advantage of you and people thinking that it's alright to take advantage of you and people thinking it's o.k. to disrespect you 'cause you're not going to do nothing about it. So, tell them to stick up for themselves. Because you don't want people disrespecting you so why do you let it happen. (Interview, 5/22/14)

Echoing school based policies like taking the girls out of co-educational gym class because they are uncomfortable without recognizing why they are feeling this way, Mercedes believes that if the girls do not want to be disrespected they should not let it happen. Instead of addressing the masculine hegemonic behavior in the school that is the root of the disrespect, girls should learn to manage the issue on their own. To be clear, I admire the resiliency shown by Mercedes, Imani, Annie and all the girls who engaged in the practice of communicating an aggressive and fearless personality to the boys. I am dismayed, however, by the environment at the school that led them to realize that it was necessary to do so. And, I am concerned that engaging in these types of postfeminist practices that privilege individual response over collective action, particularly in the face of sexual harassment, will lead them to accept postfeminist ideologies without critical consideration.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have identified specific practices the girls at FDMS used to negotiate their relationships with teachers and to attempt to control the narratives being created and shared about them at school. I have argued that some of these practices, particularly those around their understanding of sexism and their strategies for dealing with harassment from the boys, could be read as postfeminist. I have also argued that these postfeminist practices are more necessary for the girls to adopt in order to reconcile their ideas of gender equity with school policies, as well as

reconciling the pervasive and accepted masculine hegemonic behavior of the boys with the self-proclaimed “progressive” nature of the school. I believe that the girls exercised choice when they engaged in these practices. Following Mahmood’s conception of agency as a “modality of action” and the importance that Ringrose and others ascribe to understanding the context of the actions, I suggest that these practices are agentic though they do not necessarily serve to create or sustain improved conditions for the girls at school. Some concerns emerge from analyzing these practices.

In their research on early warning signs in middle school for eventual high school drop-out, Balfanz, Herzog & Iver (2007) found that “behavioral problems that many students display at the start of the middle grades do not self-correct, at least in urban middle-grade schools that serve high-poverty populations” (p. 230). Many of the practices described in this chapter such as non-participation and physical fighting that may be a part of the practice of acting “tough” can also be construed as behavioral problems in the school setting. This suggests, for example, that without teacher or institutional intervention non-participating girls were unlikely to become re-engaged with school and were at risk for becoming high school drop-outs. What may start as a form of communication or attempt to disrupt the status quo, if left unaddressed, could result in negative outcomes for the girls engaging in that practice. As has been noted earlier, there was a program to serve at-risk boys at FDMS, but not the girls.

The girls’ practices described in this chapter were recognized by the teachers at FDMS. Yet, there was no discussion around addressing them before they had real repercussions for the girls, which they sometimes did. One of the girls I spoke to quite often was a seventh grader name

Alicia whom I mention in this chapter as a defiant non-participator. My field notes reveal that at the beginning of the year Alicia was chatty and happy and engaged in her schoolwork. As the year progressed Alicia's social status increased and she developed a relationship with Elijah, a popular seventh grade boy. She also began her transformation into a defiant non-participator and a "tough" girl. By February my field notes are filled with instances of seeing Alicia's boyfriend lead her down the hall by her hair and of Alicia engaging, somewhat uncomfortably, in physical interactions with popular eighth grade boys and girls. In March Alicia is almost never prepared for class, coming in late without a pencil or books and her default expression is sullen. One of the many times she comes unprepared to ELA, Jade, the teacher, remarks "*I don't know how to help someone who doesn't want to help themselves.*" She is increasingly argumentative with the teachers who have begun to report her behavior to her mother on a daily basis. Finally after weeks of not seeing her, in April I learned that Alicia was involved in a large-scale fight at a playground nearby the school with another girl and that her mother has requested a safety transfer for her to another school (Field notes, October 2013 – April 2014). When I talked to Mercedes, one of her close friends, about the fight she explained to me that it was over nothing. When I asked Mercedes why Alicia would have agreed to participate in the fight she said: "*I think she just had enough 'cause everybody was always talking about Alicia how she always started problems, and I think Alicia just had enough and she wanted to get it over with*" (Interview, 5/22/14). Alicia spent many months engaging in practices that I would argue could have been construed as communicative, but no one was listening. As Mercedes told me sadly about losing her best friend to a safety transfer, "*Not once in this school has a boy had to transfer because of the problems that happened*" (Interview, 5/22/14).

Lastly, I have a concern that the girls at FDMS may come to accept postfeminist ideology without understanding or critically examining its tenets. I am troubled by the notion of early adolescent females of color, some from economically disadvantaged families, embracing postfeminism's assumption of equal opportunity. I suggest that understanding the practices that the girls engaged in, and critically examining the need for those practices, provides insight into the girls' daily experiences with gender inequity.

Chapter 7: “I hope nobody feels harassed” Teacher perception of gender relations and gender essentialism at FDMS

Introduction

This chapter addresses my research question focused on how teachers at FDMS experience and make meaning of gender identity and gender relations in the school context. Here I will examine two primary facets of teacher perception of gender in the school. The first is the extent to which teachers and administrators at FDMS thought gender identity mattered in their relationships with students. When I asked teachers to comment on the gender relations between teachers and students at FDMS, most teachers responded that students and teachers related to one another as individuals rather than as gendered groups. This is consistent with what Zittleman (2007) found in her study of gender perceptions of middle schoolers. Her data revealed that students perceived gender roles in a very traditional way that favored the boys at school (Zittleman, 2007). Yet, in her study “when nearly 100 teachers were asked to describe any gender issues in their schools, the overwhelming response was ‘none’” (Zittleman, 2007, p. 66). As will be demonstrated, after their initial dismissal of the role of gender in their relationships with students, teachers at FDMS go on to describe the ways in which their gender works to an advantage or disadvantage with certain students.

The second facet examined in this chapter is the gender essentialism that emerged in teachers’ discussion of the students and their behavior. I argue that it is this reliance on gender essentialist characteristics for both boys and girls that allow for certain school policies like the single sex elective courses and the acceptance of masculine hegemonic behavior in the school. Teacher perspective on gender identity and gender relations at the school was critical, as research into

education policy suggests that gender issues have not played a large role in policy making in the last 20 years. They are not directly addressed or discussed as part of policy or curriculum. As mentioned in Chapter One, Title IX (1972) is the hallmark policy of gender and education in the United States. This statute requires all educational programs that receive federal funding to comply with anti-discrimination, anti-harassment policies. Title IX addresses sexual harassment and violence in schools and the rights of pregnant and parenting teens, as well as supporting girls and women in school-based sports. It appears that more recent federal educational policies assume that Title IX addresses issues of discrimination and no further explicit policies are needed. It is interesting to note also that there are no provisions for teacher training or classroom intervention around ideas of gender equity in any current education policy. This perhaps implies that no work is needed in this area and that issues of equity have been resolved. As such, any incorporation of gender equity issues into the classroom must be dependent on the individual school community and/or individual teachers.

This chapter takes its title from my interview with Merlin, a sixth grade math teacher. When asked to characterize gender relations at the school between students, he told me:

M: There's a little bit of a problem right now with the sixth grade boys being a little too touchy with the girls. And, Michael [another 6th grade teacher] had a, like a split up conversation in his Crew, he took the boys and um, his Crew partner took the girls and it came out that they were just kind of wandering hands, breasts and butt mostly. And so, I mean that needs to be addressed in, like, every Crew.

Susan McCullough (SM): *Yeah, were the girls pretty vocal about saying “no” and “stop” and telling the teachers and stuff like that or were they just kind of freaked out?*

M: *Umm, I mean we haven’t had girls come forward and say anything I hope that nobody feels harassed.* (Interview, 1/16/14)

This exchange reveals several concerns about harassment at the school. First, is the concern that the girls were not coming forward and saying anything about the harassment that was taking place in the school. I discuss this concern in Chapter Six and focus on the girls’ idea that dealing with sexual harassment from the boys was their individual responsibility, not a concern to share with teachers. Merlin did express dismay in a later comment that no one had come forward about this issue. Secondly, there is much to unpack in Merlin’s comment “I hope that nobody feels harassed.” I believe what he wanted to share with me was his hope that no girls were hurt by the actions of the boys. However, the girls *were* being harassed, so to hope they don’t “feel” harassed strikes me as odd. To not view the boys’ actions as harassment would imply that the girls are so accustomed to this behavior that they no longer recognize it as unacceptable.

Likewise to hope they do not “feel” harassed could imply that Merlin hopes they will not take the actions seriously enough to do anything about it. Merlin does assert that the situation needs to be addressed in every Crew, however, it is not up to him to decide what other Crew leaders discuss. I believe that Merlin’s comment characterizes the overall attitude towards gender relations and gender based issues at FDMS. If teachers were made aware of a situation, they would work individually to address it. However, as has been discussed in previous chapters, much harassment went unacknowledged at the school. Likewise, in almost every case teachers acted in *reaction* to gender injustice. Only once did I ever observe a lesson that planned to include gender as a topic. In general gender related issues were not discussed at the school, not

even in the socio-emotional curriculum. I argue here that the lack of discussion around gender related issues in the school contributes to an atmosphere of gender essentialism which leads teachers and students to feel that all actions are inevitable as they are inscribed by gender identity.

As is noted above, the lack of conversation around gender in schools is by no means limited to FDMS. Yet, consistent with what I observed at FDMS, gender bias in New York City schools remains a problem, and harassment of students for gender identity and gender expression are significant elements in bullying trends. In 2009-2010 the New York City Department of Education audited incident reports in order to document “bias-related infractions of the Student Discipline Code.” Bias-related incidents accounted for 5.8% or 8,298 of behavioral incidents recorded that year. Sixty four percent of those incidents accounting for 5,732 were categorized as bias related to gender. In a separate category an additional 9.1% of incidents were categorized as relating to “gender identity, gender expression and sexual orientation” (New York City Department of Education, 2010). This is an increase by almost 10 percentage points from 2008-09 when gender biased related incidents accounted for 55% of the incidents. The second highest percentage occurred in the category of race which in 2008-09 represented 21% of the incidents, but was down to 16% in 2009-10. Finally, complaints regarding gender bias and sexual harassment are to be address by a Title IX coordinator. This is a position all schools that receive federal funding are required by law to have. A recent investigation conducted by Channel 4 news in New York City revealed that most principals and parents in the New York City public school system are not aware of who their Title IX coordinator is or that they are required to know and share that information (Burke & Glorioso, 2012).

In the next section I will discuss the way gender and teaching is discussed in education research and the ways in which the teachers felt that their gender identity might have an impact on their relationship with students.

Gender and teaching in the literature

Gender as a topic is ignored in much of the current literature on teaching in general. While teacher characteristics such as race, culture and class are studied in order to determine how these characteristics may impact student outcomes, gender has not been examined as extensively (See Dee, 2005 and Dee, 2007 for research on the importance of gender “matching” in the classroom). In addition to concerns of racial, cultural and class “matching” between teachers and students, there is research that examines the impact of teachers’ standardized test scores or the selectivity of the colleges teachers attended to determine if those factors make a difference in teacher quality and student achievement (Corcoran, Evans, Schwab, 2004; Ferguson, 2007). In the current debate about teacher quality, these components known as “teacher characteristics” in the literature seem to matter a great deal to critics and reformers. The statistics on race are the basis of a national movement towards working to increase the diversity of teacher education faculty, teacher education candidates and of educating prospective teachers to be culturally responsive. Studies tend to show that it is not essential that teachers and students “match” in race or gender in order for students to be successful (race matching (1): summarized in Ferguson, 2007 p. 100-101; gender matching (2): Ehrenberg, Goldhaber & Brewer, 1995; Carrington, Francis, Hutchings, Skelton, Read & Hall, 2007). It is widely accepted that teachers who are responsive to the various needs of their students will garner higher student outcomes.

It is important to note that when reading about the need to diversify the teaching field, diversifying almost never refers to gender. The American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education's 2010 report *An Emerging Picture of the Teacher Preparation Pipeline* shares the statistics on race and gender for the existing teacher workforce and issues a call for the importance of determining the impediments to people of color who may want to be teachers. The report also reveals the racial breakdown for the teacher education pipeline (students who are currently studying to become teachers) and does not include a gender breakdown (AACTE, 2010).

Much of the work on gender and teaching from the 1980s and 1990s focuses on historical accounts of teachers and teaching in the United States (Hoffman, 1981; Markowitz, 1993; Rousmaniere, 1997). These books highlight the teacher's voice because, the authors argue, it has been missing from the historical record. This voice is always female though the historical work typically does not consider gender as a critical issue. There is research from this body of literature in the 1990s that does look at gender as an issue in teaching but not within the political and economic context of the time. In an article from 1992 Susan McGee Bailey (one of the authors of the 1995 American Association of University Women report "How Schools Shortchange Girls") and Patricia B. Campbell argue that schools are organized around gender and perpetuate gender roles in society. Further, they note, "the pervasive nature of gender imbalance contrasts sharply with the lack of attention to gender or gender-equity issues in the current reform movement" (Bailey & Campbell, 1992, p. 73).

More recently, in their review of the international literature on gender in teaching, Elien Sabbe and Antonia Aeltermann found two distinctive trends in the nature of the research. The first they labeled “sex difference research.” This is research that essentializes male and female teachers based on binary gender difference and examines elements such as job satisfaction, opinions related to education, and motivations to become teachers through this dichotomy (Sabbe & Aeltermann, 2007, p. 526). The second trend they call “gender dynamics research.” This trend “investigates how teaching is imbued with dominant discourses and subjectivities of gender” (Sabbe & Aeltermann, 2007, p. 524). Common to studies in this trend is to “rigorously deconstruct mainstream research literature’s representation of teaching as gender neutral” (Sabbe & Aeltermann, 2007, p. 529). These studies tend to show that hegemonic discourses on gender have real consequences on a variety of work dimensions for both male and female teachers. This research suggests that whether or not teachers’ gender serves to improve academic performance the issue of gender in teaching is a real, albeit ignored one.

Teacher perceptions of the role of gender in teaching

Unlike other schools, FDMS has a relatively even gender balance in its teaching staff. There were generally two teachers in every room - a general education teacher and a special education teacher. Most teacher pairs were male and female. As such it was very easy for some teachers to comment on who their students, male or female, went to with their concerns depending on the issue they needed to deal with. Likewise because of this arrangement the teachers themselves could decide how they wanted to divide up the students in terms of dealing with their issues. In describing how he and his female partner handled the students in Crew, Larry, an eighth grade science teacher said:

But when any issues come up, whether it's just something as easy as speaking to someone about earning some detention for whatever reason or someone had a bad day we usually will advise them by gender. So I will usually advise the boys and she will advise the girls.

(Interview, 1/30/14)

Teachers offered a range of comments when asked if they believed their gender made a difference in their relationship with students. Merlin, sixth grade math teacher said *"I'll start by saying that I feel less in touch with the girls, the girl community of students just in general, like it's um, like I can, they come up to me and kick it with me, but I'm always a little bit weirded out when they are coming in for hugs and stuff"* (Interview, 1/16/14). Many teachers initially said that their gender did not matter, but then went on to describe situations in which they felt like one gender did have an advantage over the other. These situations ranged from talking with the students about what they viewed as gender specific topics such as puberty or dating, exercising authority over certain male students and physical situations, like a girl having her period. Initially April, a seventh grade special education teacher, told me when I asked her about the role gender played in teachers' relationships with students: *"I think the students don't really look at gender so much for their teachers. Like that is not a huge factor in who they respect or who they learn from, which is great"* (Interview, 2/7/14). However, later when I asked her if she thought she was ever at an advantage with students because of her gender, she replied: *"Yes. I think it helps me. I think being younger helps. I think being a female for the girls helps if there is like a female issue they want to talk about"* (Interview, 2/7/14). Lippo, a seventh grade science teacher, stated: *"I would say my only distinction is probably towards, you know, probably classically as a male teacher towards health, like if any of the boys say "I have to go to the*

nurse,” *I would question why, but if girls have to go to the nurse I’m like this..[indicates waving them off to the nurse with his hands]*” (Interview, 1/16/14). Jodie a sixth grade ELA teacher told me: *“I don't think so. I would like to think not, but I'm not sure. Like I think about male teachers talking about oh, you know, ‘I'm not going to hug the student, I'm not going to get too close.’ And I feel like free doing that, so I think in terms of like showing affection with kids, maybe a little bit”* (Interview, 2/13/14). A seventh grade science teacher told me that, though he largely believed it to be based on the individual and not on gender, he acknowledged that female teachers might have an advantage because they could leverage “the maternal thing” and students might confide in them more often (Interview, 1/13/14).

Only a few teachers were adamant that their gender mattered in their relationships with the students as well as their race, their appearance (the presence of tattoos for example) and their personality in the classroom. As Jade, a seventh grade English Language Arts (ELA) teacher, explained: *“Who you are has everything to do with your classroom. Everything, how they see you, how they react to you. If you go across the hall to science, life is very different for the white, Greek guy that's trying to, not that anything is wrong with it”* (Interview, 2/26/14). Jade confided to me that as an African-American woman who had grown up in neighborhoods similar to her students, she had a kind of short hand in cultivating and developing relationships with them. Whereas, Larry, the “white Greek guy” she refers to has to combat the assumptions and expectations the students bring into the classroom about him.

Some teachers were clear that their gender was an advantage in the development of their relationships with students. Jade explained:

I think one of the things that makes my relationship stronger than the male teachers are that they see [in her] the mommy. And they want the mommy. And so that builds a stronger, so I think that is harder for males. Even though daddies are just as important, a lot of our male teachers are younger and so they don't see them in that way. And they don't project those sort of things. (Interview, 2/26/14)

Here Jade is talking about how she utilizes her femininity to convey a sense of maternal authority over the students. I observed that male and female students wanted her approval and were a little frightened of her as well. Jade felt that she had an advantage as a woman in the classroom. She worked the maternal angle on students and as a result created strong relationships and had productive students.

Shannon, an eighth grade math teacher, agreed that being female in the school was an advantage for her when dealing with girls or boys. She said about her relationship with the girls:

I think it's important because they have some of the girls especially when they, when it's like they can vent about certain things too, that they can't really vent with a male teacher about. And, I give them the opportunity to vent because I feel like it's really important for them, they have emotions or feelings so when they vent about certain things, it's just that they feel more comfortable and they feel at ease because they're like "she used to be a girl so I'm sure she feels that way sometimes." (Interview, 1/23/14)

And she had this to say about her relationship with the boys:

I guess I have that also. I think too some of the boys I think they're more willing to listen or more like when you're getting, or when you're yelling or really put them, pull them

back up I think they're more, I think they listen to a female teacher more sometimes than a male teacher. (Interview, 1/23/14).

Larry, an eighth grade science teacher, felt that he had an advantage with the boys as a male teacher. He told me *"The examples I'm thinking of are sometimes boys will try harder because they see it's coming from another male or they feel a bond with me that the girls don't"* (Interview, 1/30/14).

Some female teachers felt that the girls were more likely to feel comfortable with them because of all the changes their bodies were going through. Vivian, a sixth and eighth grade special education teacher, said:

I think girls probably – just being a girl, girls can probably relate to me better because I'm like – for example, girls who ask me to go to the bathroom, I'll be like, "No it's first 10 minutes of class" and they're like, "No but it's an emergency." And then girls will be like – sometimes girls will just have their head on the table, and I'm like "What's wrong?" They're like, "I have really bad cramps." And then, like okay you can put your head on the table but try to listen -- stuff like that. (Interview, 1/31/14)

While it is obvious why a middle school aged girl might feel more comfortable talking about her menstrual period with a female teacher, to assume that they could not relate as well to a male teacher who also understands what the girls are going through propagates a stereotype. Likewise the girls should not be taught that they have to be silent or mysterious about the presence of their menstrual period.

Many of the female teachers spoke about the advantages they had by being able to work a maternal angle with the students. But others felt that their gender could act to disadvantage them in the classroom. Vivian, a sixth and eighth grade special education teacher, told me: “*Young female teachers definitely don’t garner as much respect as the male teachers*” (Interview, 1/31/14). She explained: “*I’m not like that authoritative, and then it’s a lot harder to work, to get that respect from them. So I do think my gender does matter in terms of relating with the students*” (Interview, 1/31/14). Interestingly here, Vivian asserts that not being authoritative stems from her gender as opposed to her particular personality or teaching style.

Merlin, a sixth grade math teacher, acknowledged that being a man did make it more difficult for him to relate to the girls. He explained: “*Just in general like they’re sometimes harder to relate to ‘cause I feel like they have a more complicated inner life already and I’m not really, and it seems like a LOT of drama and I’m not really sure what that’s all about*” (Interview, 1/16/14). Here Merlin is making a clear delineation between what he perceives as girls’ issues like the drama and boys’ issues, which he feels he can relate to better. In describing these issues as “girls’ issues” teachers are accepting and perpetuating a normative way for boys and girls to behave.

Larry, an eighth grade science teacher, who felt that he may have an advantage with his male students, felt that he might be at a disadvantage with some of his female students. He told me “*There’s some girls that I’m pretty sure they can do better based on their other academics and they just kind of say, ‘well, you get this because you’re you.’ And like I said, they haven’t specifically said this because it’s, because I’m a male, but I just sometimes get that feeling*”

(Interview, 1/30/14). Bill, the Director of Culture and Character expressed a similar sentiment. When I asked him if he thought his gender mattered in terms of his relationship with the students, he said “*Definitely.*” He went on to say that when he was a teacher “*many times girls would tell me, you know you scared me to death, we have no idea what you are thinking*” (Interview, 5/27/14).

I argue that teachers’ ideas about the role their gender identity played in their relationship with students reflected gender essentialist ideas. The female teachers had the opportunity to play “mommy” to the students and they saw this as an advantage in their ability to develop relationships with them. Some of the male teachers struggled to relate to the girls and were assumed to be the “strict” male teacher stereotype.

Gender essentialism at FDMS

I: *When you’re a girl in this school your expectations are higher up there because you’re a female.*

Susan McCullough (SM): *Hmm, wait, your expectations for what?*

I: *Like um, maturity and being able to do all that. That’s irritating at times ‘cause I want to act stupid like guys do.*

Imani, seventh grader (Interview, 5/29/14)

In this section I argue that gender essentialist beliefs on the part of the teachers as revealed through their comments about the students and their actions were a key component in constructing the girls’ and boys’ daily experiences at FDMS. As has been highlighted in other chapters, the girls felt that the teachers communicated higher expectations for them than they did for the boys both socially and academically. While some teachers acknowledged that they might be harder on the girls, other teachers said they were definitely harder on the boys because they

had to be in order to manage their behavior in the classroom. Merlin, a sixth grade math teacher said: *“I try really hard not to favor one [gender] over the other and sometimes I think I actually do less for boys because I over, like go too far in the other way, like I’m trying to avoid the pendulum swinging so I try to call on the girls more”* (Interview, 1/16/14). In any case, it is clear that the teaching staff at FDMS was communicating different expectations based on gender to the students.

Essentialist notions about boys

I think for middle school boys, like, a traditional classroom is very hard for them.

Amelia, Assistant Principal (Interview, 4/3/14)

Asking teachers about their perception of the role of gender in their relationships with students revealed both what they imagine about their gendered selves and also about that of the students. As has been discussed in other chapters, teachers often used words like “disgusting” to describe the boys behavior and noted that they felt sorry for the girls. In discussing how boys responded to being separated from the girls in Crew to talk about gender specific health education issues, Michael, a sixth grade science teacher and Crew leader, described the boys’ reaction as *“typical idiotic, laughing and giggling and not knowing what to talk about”* (Interview, 1/29/14). I believe that Michael’s comments about the boys and their behavior reveals the prevailing attitude towards the boys at FDMS. Not all teachers believed that the boys were “bad,” but they recognized that misbehaving was a norm for most boys in the school and managing the boys’ behavior in class typically required a lot of time. April, a seventh grade special education teacher, and I were discussing her single gender math and art elective course. I had observed her

teaching it to the girls and now she was rotating to the boys' class. One of the main projects in the course with the girls was sewing a pillow. She expressed her anxiety over introducing that project to the boys. April said *"I was a little nervous with the boys, speaking of which, with the sewing. I thought they were going to be like, 'This is so stupid, I'm not gay or something'"* (Interview, 2/7/14). To her surprise only one boy made that type of comment in class and the other boys *"tore that kid to shreds"* (Interview, 2/7/14). April worried that the boys would be so concerned with the importance of masculine hegemonic attitudes that they would refuse to do the project or argue with her about it. She is pleasantly surprised when they all agree to do it without complaining. I suggest this reveals that the teachers have pretty low expectations about the boys' ability to think beyond traditional gender stereotypes.

Teachers and administrators repeatedly explained to me that sitting still at a desk for six hours a day was difficult for boys. One special education teacher who worked with the sixth and eighth grades told me: *"I think just developmentally, boys are just not as able to focus"* (Interview, 1/31/14). Other teachers agreed that the boys were less engaged with school than the girls. Merlin, a sixth grade math teacher, told me: *"I think probably the biggest issue for boys is that they're totally more checked out of school. That it feels like it's less, like it has nothing for them"* (Interview, 1/16/14). Vivian, a sixth and eighth grade special education teacher, stressed to me that because school was harder for boys the teachers attempted to address their issues in Crew. She said that they spent time in Crew: *"Just kind of reinforcing what studious behavior means, and what's appropriate and not appropriate. Which usually is more for the boys than the girls. So we try to do that as much as we can"* (Interview, 1/31/14). Vivian acknowledges that spending time reinforcing what's "appropriate and not appropriate" is more for the boys and that

they “*try to do it as much as we can*” (Interview, 1/31/14). I argue that girls were aware of the gendered expectations (or lack of expectations) the teachers had for the boys and girls. It was evident in how the teachers talked about the boys as well as in structured activities in the classroom particularly in Crew.

In discussing the single gender electives, Bill, the Director of Culture and Character, was arguing for a real difference in curriculum for the boys’ classes and the girls’ classes even if it was the same subject and grade. He asserted: “*I would strongly urge people to do something much more physical with the boys*” (Interview, 5/27/14). In my observation of the classrooms, boys and girls fidgeted in their seats in equal number. Both boys and girls got up frequently to throw things in the garbage and/or sharpen their pencils just to have the chance to walk around. Also interesting here is how few teachers made the distinction between the boys who struggled with sitting still or paying attention versus the boys who intentionally disrupted class. This suggests that the teachers may have believed that the boys disrupting class simply couldn’t control themselves and that teachers were reluctant to discipline the boys for something they couldn’t control like their size or their inability to sit still. This sex stereotyping is detrimental to boys, who are told repeatedly that they can’t sit still and to the girls, who had the higher expectations placed on them.

Additionally, the boys’ treatment of the girls was sometimes a concern and impacted the way teachers related to the male students. For example, a seventh grade student, Jayden, and his seventh grade girlfriend, Maria, could be seen “making out” and acting inappropriately in the hallways on a regular basis. Jayden was far from being physically intimidating to an adult, but

he was bigger and stronger than his girlfriend and he was often seen teasing her, slamming his hand loudly on lockers right near her ears. William, a seventh grade English Language Arts teacher, said this about Jayden: *“I mean how teachers relate to him is totally based on gender, completely. And so I feel like that it’s like that for some students”* (Interview, 5/5/14). He went on to say *“Jade [a seventh grade ELA teacher] can’t stand [Jayden] because she knows he is a jerk to young women,”* and then lamented: *“I think we go a little bit harder on some of the boys sometimes”* (Interview, 5/5/14). Jayden was not one of the larger boys, but he adopted an adult manner at school. He was very involved with his girlfriend and casually ignored teachers in favor of roaming the halls with his friends. He was not confrontational as much as he was quietly disrespectful, which odd as it may sound, communicated a certain maturity in contrast to the squirmy seventh grade boys. I believe that when William said the way in which teachers related to Jayden is based on gender, he was referencing Jayden’s stereotypical “bad boy” behavior. As William points out, Jade has already written Jayden off at 13-years old.

Amelia, the Assistant Principal, further developed this idea in her conversation with me about how the boys were treated by teachers at the school. She told me *“I think an interesting thing happens with our middle school boys where there is the temptation to sort of want harsher discipline than I think is necessarily developmentally appropriate just because the instinct is you know, you’re a grown up, why don’t you know better?”* (Interview, 4/3/14). She continued explaining to me that she felt this was a very gendered reaction to the student. She said:

I do think this becomes a gender thing just because of size, that all of a sudden middle school boys get treated like they’re adults and like they should know better and so there’s this sense of you look at this child who is six feet and your instinct is to treat and reason

and talk to them and think that they should be able to behave like a grown up would.

(Interview, 4/3/14)

Amelia never mentioned to me whether she felt that girls who were also tall or more developed and looked like adults suffered under the same assumption of maturity as the boys did. But, it was clearly a great concern of hers for the male population at the school. Several times in our interview Amelia expressed to me that she was concerned that boys were punished in an overly harsh way at FDMS because of their physical size. As she said “*we treat our boys that are six feet tall different than we treat our boys who are four feet tall in a classroom. I mean one person’s actions of throwing something across the room is perceived as more threatening than the others*” (Interview, 4/3/14). She reiterated that the boys’ maturity level was not commensurate with their physicality and teachers should not therefore have higher expectations of physically more developed boys. I am not suggesting that Amelia is incorrect in her assertion. She was one of the primary disciplinarians at the school and obviously was in a better position than I am to assess the treatment of the boys at the hands of the teachers. It is interesting to note the gender dichotomy in her interpretation of the situation. The assumed maturity of the girls did not manifest itself in the concern for overly harsh punishments in Amelia’s eyes. Physical size seemed not to play any role in disciplining the girls.

In the same way that some of the female teachers saw their advantage with the female students because of being able to “relate” to them better on female issues, some teachers believed that the boys needed more attention from the male teachers. Shannon, an eighth grade math teacher told me:

I just think they [the school administrators] need to have more programs or things run by I think the men, the male teachers to get that energy or they can see, like the male teachers are men or see what a male figure, I think a lot of these boys too don't have that male figure or positive male figure in their life. (Interview, 1/23/14)

I would argue that assuming that male students can relate better to male teachers strictly based on gender is another example of gender essentialism.

Essentialist notions about girls

It hurts in a way to see some of the girls like that.

Shannon, eighth grade math teacher (Interview, 1/23/14)

Similar sex stereotyping was at work for the girls. For example, the issue of relational aggression in girls or the pervasive presence of “the drama” at FDMS was viewed as typical girl behavior by the teachers at FDMS. In their discussion of the role that media plays in girls’ perception of relational aggression, Radliff & Joseph note that films may portray girls solving the issues on their own and that “adults do not intervene, are not viewed as very helpful, or are noticeably absent - suggesting that this behavior is viewed by adults as typical of teenage girls” (Radliff & Joseph, 2011, p. 172). In fact some teachers even argued that it had a positive presence in the life of the girls. Merlin, sixth grade math teacher, said about the drama that plagued the girls’ relationships:

I mean, it definitely gives them like a richness and um, it gives them like things to do and a support and then, I think that's just like women, in 10- 20 years from now they'll be

more empathic human beings because they've been practicing it from such a young age, like trying to understand how people feel and why they feel that way. (Interview, 1/16/14)

None of the teachers told me that they had higher expectations for the girls at FDMS although that was the perception from the girls. It was also evident in some of the comments made by the teachers about gender differences in the classroom. For example, Vivian, a sixth and eighth grade special education teacher told me: *"I think girls are – it's just easier for them to not – it's easier for them to control themselves if they know there's a consequence"* (Interview, 1/31/14). In describing how he sets up his classroom, Merlin expressed his interest in making mixed gender groups at the table as often as possible to encourage the boys and girls to work together. However he also admitted that sometimes that didn't work in which case he would have to put a really "strong" girl in with a group of boys to be a good example. He said *"This one [table grouping] is a girl and three boys because I think Brianne is strong enough to sort of like boss a group into place. Which is awesome"* (Interview, 1/16/14). Again, Merlin is drawing on his assumption that as a girl Brianne will come to class prepared, pay attention and also be able to "boss" a group of boys into doing their work.

Many teachers also revealed their concern for the girls with the issues of self-esteem and insecurity particularly around the boys. Shannon, eighth grade math teacher, described to me how uncomfortable she felt watching the girls put themselves in a position where they were being admired and judged by the boys for their appearance only. She explained: *"You can tell when they feel beautiful just because of the way they're dressing or if their hair is straight or you know they got a new outfit"* (Interview, 1/23/14). She went on to describe the pain of watching

those girls allow themselves to be de-valued by the indiscriminate groping hands of the boys. She said:

The girls with insecurities have potential to be successful in their classes but they just see, they allow, a lot of them and I actually see this in this hallway, a lot of them allow these boys just to hug them or touch on them and it's just like you see him just touch and feel on [another] girl and all of a sudden he's going to come [over to you]. (Interview, 1/23/14)

She continued: “*it hurts in a way to see some of these girls like that.*” Shannon worries that girls’ with insecurities allow the boys to harass them as a way to feel better about themselves or to garner popularity at school.

Other teachers acknowledge some of the sex stereotyping they observed in the classroom and shared their concerns. Vivian, the sixth and eighth grade special education teacher said: “*In particular the seventh grade, there’s a bunch of really active and strong girls but they – you know – they play dumb. And it’s like they play dumb ... and it’s like, come on you’re really smart. You got a lot going for you, I’m not really sure why you’re doing this*” (Interview, 1/31/14). Likewise, Jade, a seventh grade ELA teacher, worried:

I think that we don't necessarily give them opportunities to explicitly learn some of the things that young ladies need to learn. To develop into sort of, how can I say this, sort of sound and well versed young women. We need to touch on those controversial things that young girls need to think about. Body image, self-esteem, just everything that you can think of that comes with the change of being a young girl. (Interview, 2/26/14)

Jade was one of the few teachers who spoke about early adolescent girl issues something that the school could try to address.

A few teachers expressed concern at the notion that certain behaviors and issues were being codified as male or female. William, the seventh grade ELA teacher, relayed this story to me about talking with girls in his Crew who were having an ongoing argument in class. He said:

It [the girls' argument] was about Terrence [a boy at the school] and it was about 'drama.' There are many layers, I'm sure. And Jade was there and they kept saying how it was a girl thing, girl things. I was like "Are you serious? You can't just say what the issue is?" So they definitely put up a wall. That never happened at my last school. I was really close to the crazy girls, so it was like "You are seriously doing this now?"

(Interview, 5/5/14)

William could not believe that the girls in his advisory class would refuse to talk to a male teacher about their issues with a boy. He notes how the girls even refer to the issue as a “girl thing” and instead choose to talk with Jade, a female teacher. William, a teacher new to the school that year, is surprised that the girls would be so gender specific in getting help with their concerns. I would argue this example demonstrates how the teachers’ essentialist ideas were being passed onto the students.

“Getting those forest fires under control”: context for essentialist beliefs

What could be the explanation for a group of intelligent thoughtful middle school educators in the 21st century reverting to gender based stereotypes in order to explain student behavior?

Elsewhere in this dissertation I have argued that a postfeminist ideology pervaded the school

obscuring many of the sexist practices and policies. This ideology however was invisible to the teachers and it was never discussed. Teachers did however provide some hints into why they allowed sexism to have a presence at the school. In this section I want to offer my theory that the teachers at FDMS relied on gender essentialist stereotypes to reconcile their awareness of problematic situations with what they perceived as their inability to effectively address them. I argue that teachers' complaints about students' lack of pride in academic achievement and the lack of real consequences for the students lead teachers to feel impotent in their ability to affect change in the school culture. While this is not directly tied to gender relations in the school, I believe it is critical to understanding the context in which teachers felt they could not make an impact.

Almost every teacher I interviewed commented on the students' general lack of engagement with the school curriculum. Amelia, the Assistant Principal, referred to it as "*A disconnect between intellectual engagement and academic work*" (Interview, 4/3/14). She felt FDMS had many bright students who enjoyed participating in class and discussing a range of topics, but who had no interest in (or concern with) completing their school work. There was a sense from many of the teachers that the focus on the socio-emotional curriculum came at the cost of academic achievement. Jade, a seventh grade ELA teacher, echoed many other teachers' sentiments in her comments that "*I feel like we focus here and we celebrate here, the wrong things. It's a school and we should celebrate academic pride*" (Interview, 2/26/14). Many teachers attributed this disconnect as well as the behavioral problems in the school with a lack of real consequences for student misbehavior and failing academics. Apparently it was well known by the students in the school that you could fail sixth and seventh grade and still be promoted to eighth grade. While

students could be suspended for missing a series of detentions, other behavioral infractions were dealt with in restorative circles (mediated discussions between the students) or phone calls to parents. Many teachers believed that these were not “real” enough consequences for the students and in fact did nothing to alter the inappropriate behaviors taking place throughout the school. While discussing the boys’ behavior in the hallways, Michael, a sixth grade science teacher said “*Yes, middle school is a nightmare, high school is a nightmare, we all know. So it’s not like oh it’s going to be better somewhere else – we’ve been trying*” (Interview, 1/29/14). Michael is indicating his abdication from any role which might attempt to affect change at the school because “it’s not going to be better somewhere else.” Other teachers blamed the administration for over-relying on the very cumbersome Habits of Work and Learning (HOWLS) discipline system to be meaningful for the students and for not following through on more severe consequences. The administration characterized the issue of disconnection between intellectual engagement and academic performance as one the middle school was “struggling” with.

Other teachers shared the belief that another de-motivating factor for the students was the 6 – 12th grade model of FDMS. Jade told me “*I think one of the things that falls socially here is that the high school is upstairs. Nobody is talking about college; nobody is talking about high school competitive exams, specialized high schools because they want them to feed upstairs*” (Interview, 2/26/14). Other teachers believed that because the high school that FDMS students fed into was not a competitive or specialized high school it changed the population of students who attended FDMS. That is, if FDMS had a reputation for getting students into New York City’s competitive or specialized high school programs, a different demographic of student and their families would be interested in FDMS.

In addition to feeling unsupported by the administration teachers blamed other external sources for the masculine hegemonic behavior at the school that they felt they could not change. There was also a tension between the teachers and the families in the school that the teachers believed did not value education. The teachers felt that many families were communicating this lack of importance of education to their children by not providing their own consequences for misbehaving or not helping them complete their school work at home. Some teachers expressed concern that students did not have positive role models in their lives, particularly boys, or that students adopted popular culture role models from the media who also did not emphasize the value of education. While many teachers believed that students were coming from difficult home situations where poverty may have been an issue and in which education was not valued, not all teachers agreed. In comparing her former low income students from East New York to her students at FDMS, Jodie, a sixth grade ELA teacher, said: *“I think we don't always get the top performers academically. So I think out there I taught much brighter kids who were way more advanced”* (Interview, 2/13/14). Jodie suggests here that academic performance is not always tied to poverty or difficult home situations. Jade, a seventh grade ELA teacher, had come from a more economically disadvantaged school with a population of children that she described as *“coming to school just to eat”* (Interview, 2/26/14). Still she felt that she was able to get better work out of her former students. She believed that the advantages that FDMS students had worked to their disadvantage. She explained *“It isn't socio-economic and so because [the students at FDMS] are more entitled they work less, they are less motivated”* (Interview, 2/26/14). She felt that the parents at FDMS were more involved, but again it did not contribute

to students who were more academically motivated or successful. Likewise, April, a seventh grade special education teacher, told me:

These students [at FDMS] have a lot more material wise and even like support at home than my old students. However, because they aren't really held accountable for their actions, they are almost equal to or worse behavioral wise than say some of my students who had zero structure or guidance of any adult in any way at home. (Interview, 2/7/14)

I believe that teachers attempted to control their own individual classrooms, but did not feel they or anyone at the school was effectively addressing the overarching academic or behavioral issues at the school. I argue that this lack of ownership for the overall culture of the school on the part of the teachers and the administrators contributed to the need to rely on gender essentialism when discussing certain behaviors at the school. Teachers and administrators maintained a sense that what was happening at the school was, to a certain extent, inevitable due to their acceptance of essentialist gender stereotypes for boys and girls.

Given what I argue was the deeply ingrained gender essentialism at work with both the teachers and the students at FDMS, I wondered about the potential for change. I have described the teachers as not exercising ownership and feeling unempowered by the culture at the school. I should be clear that in a million small ways every day the teachers were supporting the students and attempting to manage their behavior. What I did not see was any attempt at generating a school-wide change on some of these issues. Again, some teachers believed that it was the families' responsibility to address issues such as sexist behavior at the school. They suggested that it was a boys' parents' responsibility to instill a sense of right and wrong in terms of

behavior with girls. Michael, a sixth grade science teacher, said about the boys' harassment of the girls in the hallway: *"The boys' parents should have told them this, but they get it in their head that it's okay, and it's not okay"* (Interview, 1/29/14). He wondered out loud *"And when is it going to stop; when are they going to just be able to be in school?"* (Interview, 1/29/14). In terms of creating lasting change in student behavior and beliefs, Mike, a seventh grade science teacher, agreed with Michael. He told me that he believed that ultimate accountability with "that stuff" is with the parents even though school has to be responsible to talk to students about it. He believed that the school sets the tone for the learning environment and students need to know the rules, but for real change to occur the school had to be backed up by the parents (Interview, 1/13/14). When asked to compare his former school, located in the Bronx in the poorest congressional district in the U.S. and FDMS, William, a seventh grade ELA teacher, said: *"I mean I think like my knee jerk reaction is to say that it is better here socially because we do all of these things that are more socio-emotional and health, but I don't know if that is actually true"* (Interview, 5/5/14). William's comment suggests that the informal attempts to address socio-emotional issues at the school was not enough.

Many of the teachers and the Assistant Principal held beliefs about the school environment that were inconsistent with my observations and with what the girls and other teachers told me. I suggest that this may have played a role in the administration's lack of support for the teachers when it came to behavioral issues with the boys. For example, Lippo, a seventh grade social studies teacher who also worked in the high school, told me: *"I think that the kids in the middle school who probably don't even know they are gay or just very effeminate, in that like some of them ... I'm sure you know who they are at 50 feet away you know, you never hear, you rarely*

here gay slurs against them and stuff like that” (Interview, 1/16/14). My experience particularly in the seventh grade was that the male students were constantly calling each other “faggots” and using “gay” derogatorily to describe other male students’ clothing or hairstyles. This happened quietly in class, because they knew they’d be reprimanded, but quite loudly in the cafeteria and on the playground. Similarly, Amelia, the Assistant Principal claimed: *“I like to see us as a space where like kids’ individuality isn’t stifled by middle school cliques or accepted ways to be, and I think our teaching body has a lot to do with supporting kids in that”* (Interview, 4/3/14). While I agree that individual teachers were very supportive to certain students, based on my conversations with the girls, I argue that the majority of girls were deeply concerned with accepted ways to be at the school and that these accepted ways were being policed primarily by the boys, and by other girls who were higher up in the social hierarchy. Perhaps this disjuncture in the perception of the culture of the school can be explained by the following comment made by Sarai, the librarian. She said:

I think there are strong personalities and really kind of creative and clever, you know smart, thoughtful girls but I think sometimes they get over, the attention is always about putting out forest fires here. You know, and of course it has to be because without getting those forest fires under control but I think it just taps the energy that is available to really cultivate, really safe places for girls and leadership for girls that is specifically meant for girls. (Interview, 3/27/14)

As I have stated elsewhere, the need to direct resources towards controlling the mostly male, disruptive and disrespectful students in the school detracted from investment in the girls at the school.

Lastly, when asked if the girls would be interested in learning about or discussing issues of gender inequity in society, one female teacher told me “*I don't know if they've actually had to be in a society and be engendered but I think it would be really interesting*” (Interview, 1/31/14).

That the teacher would question whether or not the girls had had gendered experiences in the world when they were so heavily gendered at school was disconcerting. Only one teacher, Jade, a seventh grade ELA teacher, spoke with any real interest in combatting the gender essentialism that was being reified at the school on a daily basis. When I asked her what she would like to see FDMS do for the girls, if the school could do anything, she responded:

That's a tough question because we don't want to promote gender discrimination or segregation. So we don't want to do too much programming that is separate. At least I don't think because I think boys can benefit from watching the development of young girls and understanding their issues. I think that these things need to be done collaboratively. Collaborative classes, awareness of what girls go through. What a menstrual cycle is and why it's not an “ewww.” (Interview, 2/26/14)

I argue that persistent essentialist stereotypes about boys and girls were in part a function of teachers' overall perception of the culture of the school and their inability to affect change in that culture.

Conclusion

More than 20 years ago, educational researchers Bailey and Campbell suggested two possible strands for future school reform: one strand based on local control of schools by communities and families that would respect shared decision making and give each member of the school community a voice. This is the model they see as being in line with feminist pedagogy and most

beneficial in moving toward gender equity. The second strand is described as embracing national standards and accountability. In this strand they note “reformers emphasize accountability and competitiveness” (Bailey & Campbell, 1992, p. 80). The authors stress that in such a context “questions of gender equity must be central to any assessment program” and that it is possible to reach a gender equitable education with this model only when “gender equity is an explicit goal in assessment procedures” (Bailey & Campbell, 1992, p. 81). I argue that FDMS is a school attempting to operate under the first model of reform -- employing shared decision making and allowing the opportunity for every community member to have a voice -- within the larger city, state and nationwide context of the second model of reform, solidly rooted in accountability and competition. In this way, FDMS can continue to labor under the assumption that gender inequity is not being reproduced at their seemingly progressive school, but do so without any explicit gender based curriculum or policies in place to ensure gender equity. It is the perfect postfeminist environment. Because the United States has embraced the reform model of standards and accountability as a nation with no explicit goals for gender equity, we find it missing from school policies, curricula and classroom discussion. Lack of educational policy related to gender in the United States is discussed in more detail in the Introduction.

While other topics and issues related to early adolescence were discussed in Crew, gender identity and gender relations, with few exceptions, were not. I have argued in previous chapters that the girls were forced to rectify their experiences in school with the school’s self-professed “progressive” nature, one in which students and teachers developed close and meaningful relationships. As Currie, Kelly and Pomerantz (2009) remind us in their book *GirlPower: Girls Reinventing Girlhood*, “individualism is the philosophical foundation of Western democracies,

hence an unexamined principle of liberal education” (p. 202). Likewise, researchers have argued that the lack of discussion around gender and gender issues is a consequence of both postfeminist and neoliberal ideologies at work in public schools (Ringrose, 2007). In keeping with postfeminist ideology the existence of government protections through Title IX is all that is necessary for gender equal schools. As such, perhaps it is actually not surprising at all that issues of gender based issues were not discussed or examined critically in the school context. In Zittleman’s (2007) study of gender perception in middle schoolers she found that “gender stereotypes continue to be a major influence in urban, suburban and rural America, in wealthy and poor communities, in communities that are diverse as well as those that are homogenous” (p. 91). In her conclusion she states that issues such as “relational aggression and fighting, appearance, entitlement, unfair discipline and homophobia can create pressures that detract from both the academic emphasis and social well-being of a school community” (Zittleman, 2007, p. 91). Further she warns “schools that do not attend to these issues are placing a number of school goals at risk” (Zittleman, 2007, p. 91). By not actively discussing gender based issues as part of the school curriculum, the teachers at FDMS were putting school goals and I would argue, some students, at risk.

Katherine was one of the first girls to talk to me when I got to FDMS. She is a slight, very skinny seventh grade Latina girl with pale skin and lots of thick dark hair. I noticed her in class right away because she wore very thick eyeliner all around her eyes in a way that almost looks like an Ancient Egyptian figure. She also wears very bright purples and pinks almost every day. Over the course of the year Katherine’s eyeliner becomes less and less bold and by the end of the year (as early as December there are days that she doesn’t wear it) she will have given up

wearing it altogether. In March she tells Sophia that she used to wear make-up but has given it up for the “natural look.” Though she doesn’t say much in class, I talk to her often. She is a classic quiet non-participator - opens her books, remains silent, does nothing. She has attracted the attention of one of the seventh grade paraprofessionals, Sophia. Sophia sits with her sometimes and checks in on how she is doing. Katherine will typically work if Sophia is there. Unlike some of the other students, Katherine always has her backpack and she always has a pencil or pen to write with. She has a group to sit with at lunch, but she doesn’t seem to have any really close friends. I notice her sneaking out of the cafeteria during lunch often probably to hide in the stairwells. Occasionally she will converse in the cafeteria with an adult like Sophia or Barack, the paraprofessionals or Heather, the parent coordinator. Among the things Katherine and I talk about is how much she dislikes the school and can’t wait until she doesn’t have to go here any more. We also talk about other issues at the school as well. This is from my field notes:

While Cammie is talking Katherine blurts out that she feels like there is too much dating at this school and it makes her feel pressure to date. I ask if it’s like “going steady, having a boyfriend” and she says no it’s “dating all over the place.” I say I haven’t noticed that and how do they know about the dating. Katherine says she sees it in the hallways including kissing and they read about it in the bathroom.

I ask Katherine if there is someone she wants to date and she says no the boys at this school just laugh at her. She says she might go with a boy, but the boys at this school are immature. (Field notes, 10/30/13)

In April, on a work day in social studies when the students are all drawing, I sit at a table with Katherine. That day she immediately starts talking to me about the unwanted attention that she gets from men, particularly men who are older than her. She says they talk to her in stores, on the street, in her neighborhood, etc. She says she doesn't understand why they think she would want them to talk to her – she doesn't dress suggestively, she “stays covered up” and she doesn't wear a lot of make-up or try to look older than she really is. In the middle of one story in which an older man is talking to her and she is trying to get away, Sophia comes over and says to me, as mentioned earlier, “I tell her to never walk alone, always walk with friends, take different routes to and from school, but if you are alone and a man comes up to you tell him that your father is picking you up on the next corner and you have to go and meet him – that's what I tell her.” Cammie is sitting nearby and we all nod in agreement with Sophia - as long as she follows these rules especially if a grown man thinks her father is coming to meet her, she'll be safe (Field notes, 4/9/14).

Abruptly, Katherine begins to tell me another story. She says that she stays away from boys but there was this one boy who lives across the street from her and they were friends. She liked him a lot. She said he goes to private school and wears a uniform and that they would hang out and talk on the phone. One day he invited her over to his house and when she got there she was surprised to find that no one else was there. She realized that he didn't invite her over as just a friend and he sexually assaulted her. She explains to me that she's so sad and can't stop wondering why he would do that. She tells me she can't believe it. She can't stop thinking about him. Katherine tells me this story in class at a table surrounded by other girls. She is

talking directly to me, but it is clear that the other girls can hear what she is saying (Field notes, 4/9/14).

Katherine's story epitomizes what can happen when gender essentialism is allowed to prevail in a school environment. Girls believe that they have no recourse except to turn to other men for help. When masculine hegemonic behavior is naturalized by students and teachers, as was the case at FDMS, girls understand that they should expect boys and men to harass them or even assault them. In Katherine's case, after being assaulted she continues to ask herself what *she* did wrong, what *she* could have done differently. She is 14-years old.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

Introduction: “What are you finding?”

I set out in this research project to explore early adolescent girls’ and their teachers’ experience of gender and gender relations in an urban public middle school. Because of gaps in educational research from the mid-1990s to now about girls’ experiences in school, I was unsure of what I would find. Though I understood there to be an undercurrent of postfeminism at work in our culture at large, I did not know how it might be manifest in a middle school setting. In this chapter I will discuss my findings and recommendations.

Throughout my fieldwork at Fort Defiance Middle School (FDMS) various teachers would comment on how great it was that I had the whole school year at FDMS for research and how interesting my project was. Then they would invariably ask me: “What are you finding?” As I have discussed throughout the dissertation, the behavior that I was observing, taking field notes on and attempting to analyze was so strongly inscribed as “typical” middle school behavior for both the boys and the girls that I was often not sure how to respond when asked about my findings. At times it seemed I was finding characteristics that merely described the middle school environment - chaos, fighting, anxiety, boys acting inappropriately to girls - nothing that was new to the teachers. While it was interesting to me I worried that as findings my data would seem unsophisticated especially to a seasoned group of middle school educators. In fact I sometimes had to stop work to reflect on my data. I found myself wondering if all of this couldn’t just be chalked up to “boys will be boys,” “girls will be girls” and the rules of the schoolyard? Immersion in the middle school environment sometimes made it difficult to

remember that I was there as a feminist researcher to challenge those notions and push past the behavior I saw to look for motivations and gender essentializing assumptions. I realized that my research was less about what I was “finding” and more about how to bring critical analysis to my data and examine it in the context of postfeminism.

Discussion

In his book *Microaggression in Everyday Life: Race, Gender and Sexual Orientation* Derald Wing Sue (2010) asserts “making the ‘invisible’ visible is the first step toward combatting unconscious and unintentional racism, sexism, heterosexism, and other forms of bigotry” (p. 20). It has been my intention in this dissertation to make the invisible sexist and gender essentialist practices at FDMS visible in an effort to understand and challenge them. Below I will highlight the important findings that I argue need to be made visible.

My findings from this study reveal a number of concepts. First, *middle school is difficult for girls*. Perhaps this is not a new revelation, but it is an important one to reiterate. Many factors contribute to the difficulties that girls face in middle school and, more importantly, it is my assertion that middle school does not *have* to be this difficult for girls. The acceptance by the staff at FDMS of the gossiping, friendship betrayal, physical fighting and drama at the school was largely perpetuated by the notion that this is how girls in middle school behave. And they do. But, I argue accepting this behavior as typical does nothing to address the issues or help the girls through this difficult time. Likewise, much of the literature serves to point out how girls behave in middle school without challenging the gendered nature of the research. As Jessica Ringrose asks “What are the discursive effects of claims that girls are naturally relationally

aggressive... What is the point of the construction of new gender differences and comparisons?” (Ringrose, 2013, p. 32). In other words, how does cataloguing girls’ injustices to one another contribute to our attempt to change destructive middle school culture?

It was pointed out to me repeatedly by the staff at FDMS that boys do not have the same issues as girls, that they are able to deal with their friendship concerns and vying for position on the social ladder in different ways. Instead of accepting the dichotomy between boys’ behavior in this situation and girls’ behavior, I suggest that it is possible to acknowledge these differences and work systemically to address them. I recognize that the girls at FDMS sat with teachers and administrators to resolve their individual issues time and time again. As Amelia, the Assistant Principal, told me: *“You’ll spend weeks on one kid and another and the next week it’s the other kid and someone new. If you think about lesson learned extending to the next situation - you don’t see a lot of that in middle school girls”* (Interview, 4/3/14). I am suggesting that intervention on a larger scale focused on this issue could be more useful in addressing the issue. I am also arguing that the large scale interventions did not take place because it was assumed that this was typical girl behavior.

Secondly, *gender dominance is an issue*. At FDMS the dominant position the boys held over the girls, though disregarded as a concern by the faculty and administration, was an issue for the girls. Though the often violent language and physical actions of the boys towards the girls were not hidden from the staff, the staff reconciled this behavior to themselves as typical and permitted dominant masculine hegemony to prevail at the school. As April, a seventh grade special education teacher, told me about the boys: *“They do have a tougher time with*

vocabulary. Like they will call the girls slutty or degrade them verbally” (Interview, 2/7/14).

April mentioned this to me, but did not suggest that anything needed to be done in order to change this behavior. Likewise, teachers and administrators acknowledged an imbalance of resources offered to boys and girls, but when I was there no discussion or attempt to reconcile this issue was ever broached. I argue that allowing this situation to persist not only negatively impacts the girls, but the boys as well. Boys in the school are viewed by the girls and the staff as raucous, inappropriate and troubled. In this way, the school was complicit in teaching the girls that certain male behavior is to be expected and tolerated and that it was their job to accept it.

Third, *the girls utilized harmful practices to manage the school environment.* The practices I saw girls engaging in to negotiate the school environment were in many ways ingenious and in other ways detrimental to them. Not participating in class to send a message to your teacher has associated risks such as failing class. Likewise engaging in physical fights might earn you a reputation as “tough” but the risks of detention or even suspension were high not to mention the risk of bodily harm. While these individual solutions were admirable, they were not constructive or sustainable. I suggest here that the implementation of these practices by some of the girls indicate that they were operating within a postfeminist framework. That is, the girls believed the school environment to be gender equitable and as such felt that their concerns needed to be addressed individually. The girls relied on the postfeminist concept of individual responsibility to manage their concerns. I also argue that to a certain extent the school was complicit in these practices by not offering other opportunities to the girls to share their concerns, particularly their issues with the behavior of the boys. As such the school environment could be seen as toxic for the girls.

Lastly, *teachers were operating under the guise of postfeminism*. Teachers and administrators, like the girls, believed in gender equity. They believed not just that it was possible but that it existed in their school. As such, they were unable to recognize inequity in school policies and their own practices. Likewise teachers were overwhelmed with behavioral concerns at the school and were sometimes unsure if it was their role to deal with the masculine hegemonic behavior and issues of sexism. The impact of postfeminist ideology can be found in school policies — particularly the single gender elective courses and the distribution of resources that favored the boys — and in student and teacher discourse about the essentialist nature of boys’ and girls’ behavior. I would argue that the impact of postfeminist ideology can also be felt in the absence of constructive gender based policies and discourse at the school.

A postfeminist ideology pervades the middle school environment at FDMS and allows for gender domination by the boys, gender segregation and gender essentialism particularly on the part of the teachers and administrators. This environment negatively impacts the girls at the school. The girls distrust one another and are insecure about sharing personal information with new friends. They engage in relational aggression and in physical fights over friendship betrayals and gossip which is often connected to their relationships with boys. Making these issues and concerns visible and shining a light on the absence of support for gender equity in the school is an important first step. Next is to focus on understanding how gender inequity is permitted to persist in public education and in our culture at large and work to address the issue.

Microaggression and postfeminism

In this section I argue that systemic gender inequity persists at least in part through gender based microaggressions and a pervasive postfeminist ideology that is well suited to thrive in the neoliberal school environment. As discussed in earlier chapters I am in great debt to the work of Eduardo Bonilla-Silva and his theory of what he refers to as “color-blind racism.” He argues that institutional and subtle forms of racism allow negative cultural and racial stereotypes to persist. He asserts that instead of blaming “biological and moral inferiority” for the status of minorities in the United States, as was done in the Jim Crow era, now whites point towards “naturally occurring phenomena” and “cultural limitations” to explain contemporary racial injustice (Bonilla-Silva, 2010, p. 2). Bonilla-Silva’s position is echoed by Derald Wing Sue, who studies racial and gender based microaggressions. Sue tells us that “bias, prejudice, and discrimination in North America have undergone a transformation, especially in the post-civil rights era when the democratic belief in the equality of marginalized groups (racial minorities, women, and gays/lesbians) directly clashes with their long history of oppression in society” (Sue, 2010, p. 23). He goes on to say that “research indicates that sexism and heterosexism have not decreased, but instead have become more ambiguous and nebulous, making them more difficult to identify and acknowledge” (Sue, 2010, p. 23). Importantly he notes that these acts are not being perpetrated by consciously sexist individuals but rather by “well-intentioned people, who are strongly motivated by egalitarian values, who believe in their own morality, and who experience themselves as fair-minded and decent people who would never discriminate” (Sue, 2010, p. 23). Sue defines microaggressions in this way:

Microaggressions are the brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or

negative racial, gender, sexual-orientation, and religious slights and insults to the target person or groups. (Sue, 2010, p. 5)

My findings reveal the presence of gender microaggressions being carried out by students, teachers and administrators at FDMS. Teachers and faculty overtly praised the girls for being better at school, smarter and more organized than the boys. However when they asked the girls to accommodate the insulting and derogatory and often violent male behavior they were communicating microaggression. In working with a taxonomy of gender microaggressions, Capodilupo, Nadal, Corman, Hamit, Lyons and Weinberg (2010), noted six themes: (1) sexual objectification, (2) second-class citizen, (3) assumptions of inferiority, (4) denial of the reality of sexism, (5) assumptions traditional gender roles, and (6) use of sexist language (p. 197). With the exception of number three - girls were assumed to be intellectually superior to the boys - all of these themes were manifest at FDMS.

I argue that the microaggression carried out on a daily basis at FDMS works in tandem with postfeminist ideology to perpetuate systemic gender inequity at the school. As has been noted, both the teachers and students at FDMS believed in gender equity at their school. In their book *Girl Power: Girls Reinventing Girlhood*, Currie, Kelly & Pomerantz (2009) refer to a 2003 study undertaken at a school “committed to gender equity” (p. 212). The researchers found that the teachers and students agreed that gender equity existed at their school. However, the researchers also assert that: “Classroom observations and student interviews revealed significant differences in how seventh grade boys and girls behaved and were treated in their classrooms” (Currie, Kelly & Pomerantz, 2009, p. 212). Notably, “the students interpreted these differences as reflecting natural differences between boys and girls; thus they described their experience as equitable”

(Currie, Kelly & Pomerantz, 2009, p. 212). In its reification of the neoliberal ideal of meritocracy, school has become the ideal site for postfeminist ideology and girls the ideal subject. Girls are taught to believe they can do anything and are also being socialized to believe that they are more naturally capable of success than boys. This is part of the postfeminist trope. As cultural theorist Susan Hopkins writes: “The story on offer here is one of power through and control over one’s own identity invention and re-invention” (quoted in Harris, 2004 p. 17). Harris, likewise, asserts that through the constructs of postfeminism “young women are disciplined into creating their own successful life trajectories and into taking personal responsibility if they fail” (Harris, 2004, p. 35). Taken together the dominant discourse that girls can do anything but must take individual responsibility for their futures and possible failures, the constant degrading verbal and physical harassment from the boys, and the subtle sexist language and behavior of the teachers and administrators at FDMS revealed a perfect postfeminist ideology at work. As I have mentioned in earlier chapters, I am concerned by a school environment that is accepting of essentialist beliefs, sexist behavior and privileges the notion of individual responsibility in young women particularly in the face of sexual harassment and, in some cases, sexual assault. This is especially troubling when that school environment is considered gender equitable by the students, faculty and administration. Likewise, I am concerned about an educational environment in which girls do not have the opportunity to discuss gender in a critical way in order to combat the constructs of postfeminist ideology. As Currie, Kelly & Pomerantz (2009) argue “without access to discourses about the socially constructed nature of gendered inequalities, girls are encouraged to think about their feminine identities through a heterosexual matrix that renders only a limited range of specific, culturally mandated practices of girlhood - and subsequently womanhood - intelligible” (p. 203).

Recommendations

There are likely many middle schools in New York City and all over the United States in which administrators believe that they are successfully addressing the socio-emotional needs of their students. They are working, as FDMS does, to provide a safe environment and for each student to feel that there is at least one trusted adult to share his/her concerns with at school. The impetus to create a small protective social environment for educating middle school students is understandable. But students must also be made aware of large social issues within the safe space of that environment. Administrators must acknowledge that despite their best efforts at home, in their own schools, the national school reform movement does not take into consideration the socio-emotional needs of students. As such educators, administrators and families must advocate for an education that focuses on the needs of students including making them aware of the inequities that exist in society. The neoliberal and postfeminist ideologies that drive current reform efforts only serve to perpetuate these social inequities.

The policies of *No Child Left Behind* and *Race to the Top* are firmly rooted in academic achievement and accountability through relentless assessment of both students and teachers. That the United States has adopted a school reform model based on assessment and accountability is, in itself, evidence of the existence of neoliberal and postfeminist ideology at work on school policy. While it could be argued that the assessment model does address some persistent problems in public education, it simply does nothing to address sexism in schools. A huge disservice is being done to girls when we ignore them and sexism persists in our schools;

when we teach them that there are no barriers to their success; when we teach them not to ask for help or to organize for collective action against gender injustice.

Teachers have to talk about gender issues explicitly in their classrooms and administrators must advocate to policy makers to create policies and curriculum around gender based issues. In *Radical Possibilities* Jean Anyon argues that “students who are knowledgeable about dominant forms of power and how this power affects them can better move from self-blame to informed efforts of change” (Anyon, 2005, p. 180). Where is the anti-sexist curriculum? Where are the antiracist and anti-homophobic curricula? If we believe we must teach middle school children how to best copy notes from a SMARTboard and give them time in class to effectively organize their backpacks, how can we ignore the pressing social issues that they are already immersed in? Below I make some recommendations for moving forward in addressing these issues with middle school students.

Anti-sexist curriculum

Early adolescence is a confusing time. I argue that students need more than a generic health curriculum that only covers basic information about biological differences. Middle school students need a curriculum that allows them to understand the social construct of gender. They need a curriculum that helps them to deconstruct gender based stereotypes and helps them to understand gender essentialism. There are organizations external to school that provide anti-sexist curriculum, but to underscore the importance of these ideas this curriculum must be offered in school during the school day and include students from everywhere on the gender spectrum. To reiterate Jade, a seventh grade ELA teacher’s, comments: “*I think these things*

need to be done collaboratively. Collaborative classes, awareness of what girls go through. What a menstrual cycle is and why it's not an 'ewww'” (Interview, 2/26/14).

Girls' groups

Almost every girl who participated in one of the three focus groups I held at FDMS asked me if they could participate in another group. At the end of each of the three groups there was always a girl who asked if we were meeting again next week or next month and it was revealed that many of the other girls thought that the group was to meet regularly. Several girls also mentioned the desire for a girls' group in their interviews when I asked them what they would like FDMS to do for them, if the school could do anything. Teachers agreed that having a girls' group at the school, especially in light of the fact that there was a boys' group, would be beneficial to the girls. Also important in girls' emerging awareness of sexism in their everyday life, Currie, Kelly & Pomerantz urge us not to tell girls to simply ignore the messages they are receiving and not to tell them it doesn't matter. They write: “Telling girls to ignore the rules that dominate adolescent interaction can have the opposite effect than intended, because ignoring these rules runs the risk of positioning girls on the margins of peer culture” (2009, p. 205). As Jean Anyon (1984) wrote: “We must nurture in females a sense of solidarity and potentiation” (p. 46). A girls' group could be a place for comradery, education and advocacy.

Media literacy and advocacy

Much research on girls concludes in calling for an education in media literacy for girls (Currie, Kelly & Pomerantz, 2009). The argument is that if girls recognize the sexist nature of the advertisements or other forms of media they can understand it as a form of power and control. I

agree that media literacy should be an essential part of the curriculum for boys and girls as early as elementary school. But I would go beyond interpretation of these messages to include advocacy for changing these messages. A feminist web based organization called The Representation Project (therepresentationproject.org) urges readers to take their pledge: “I pledge to use my voice to challenge society’s limiting representations of gender.” Likewise, they have a campaign that received attention in the conversations regarding the high profile commercials that aired during Superbowl in February 2015 called “Not Buying It.” This campaign urges viewers to identify sexist advertising and then take to social media with the hashtag “notbuyingit,” vowing not to purchase the item or support the company in question and urging others to do the same. I suggest the dual approach of literacy and advocacy as the most effective option for teaching boys and girls about gender bias in media.

Bullying curriculum

The bullying curriculum at FDMS, like the anti-bullying movement in the United States in general, was generic. Students at FDMS participated in Town Hall meetings in which they were encouraged to be “upstanders.” That is, to speak out if they saw other students being bullied. Administrators acted out scenes in which a student was ignored by a small group of students. They spoke out against name-calling in the hallways. They showed a New York City Department of Education sponsored video depicting a father talking about his son who had committed suicide for being bullied. Never once in their curriculum did they suggest students consider issues that are linked to bullying behavior such as racism, sexism or homophobia. In fact when I asked Bill, the Director of Culture and Character, who organized the Town Halls and the “character” curriculum if these issues were ever included he responded: “[*They’re*] not, that

would be great. I'm glad you spoke about that because as I am designing the school curriculum piece we can bring up the fact of bullying then talk about all of the different ways a person can be bullied" (Interview, 5/27/14). Based on my observations at FDMS the issue of bullying received so much vague attention it was almost relegated to a joke. Students would randomly call out in class that someone was bullying them. More than once I saw a student accuse a teacher of bullying him/her when the teacher insisted that the student do something. To be clear, bullying in school is real. I am suggesting that students understand that this content-free bullying curriculum has little meaning in the face of actual bullying which occurs for a reason. Bullying curriculum should address these important issues.

Race and class

There is no question that race and class played an important role in what I observed at FDMS. While my study was limited by my inability to gather information necessary to analyze these factors at the school, future studies must take them into consideration. A comparative study between two schools with different demographics would be useful. Recently President Obama introduced a mentoring initiative for boys and young men of color called "My Brother's Keeper." Almost instantly African-American feminists including Alice Walker, Angela Davis and Anita Hill called on the President to extend the initiative to support girls and young women of color (African American Policy Forum, n.d.). The African American Policy Forum (AAPF) launched a campaign calling for the inclusion of girls and young women of color. On their website they state: "We believe that any program purporting to uplift the lives of youth of color cannot narrow its focus exclusively on half the community" (African American Policy Forum, n.d.). In February 2015 The African American Policy Forum released a report called *Black Girls*

Matter: Pushed Out, Overpoliced, and Underprotected. This report “explores the disproportionate impact of zero tolerance policies on Black girls and other girls of color” (Crenshaw, 2015). In a document by the AAPF entitled *Did You Know? The Plight of Black Girls & Women in America* it states: “Over the last decade over 100 million dollars has been invested in achievement, drop out prevention, and mentoring initiatives exclusively targeting Black and brown boys. During this same period, less than 1 million dollars in funding targeted Black and brown girls” (AAPF, n.d.). It is evident not only that comparative studies on the experiences of girls in school from different demographics are needed, but also that more research focusing on the experiences of girls of color in school is necessary as well.

Conclusion

On Halloween night, four months after I concluded my fieldwork at FDMS, I was standing in front of my apartment building handing out candy when Alicia and her family walked by. Alicia had been involved in a significant physical fight in a park near FDMS and her mother had requested a safety transfer from the school for both she and her sister. Though I had heard from her close friend Mercedes that Alicia ended up at a good school and liked it, I had thought how difficult it must have been for her to start at a new school in the middle of seventh grade and wondered where she had ended up. We were happy to see each other and I immediately introduced myself to Alicia’s mom, a cheerful looking woman with a big smile. I asked Alicia what school she went to now and if she liked it. She told me the name of the school and said that yes, she liked it. I recognized her school as a sixth - eighth grade school and realized that as an eighth grader now she must be applying to high school. I asked her about this process, which she would have largely avoided if she had stayed at FDMS and gone on to Fort Defiance High

School. Her mother prompted her saying proudly “tell her where you are applying.” Alicia replied that she was applying to the High School of Fashion Industries, an arts focused high school in Manhattan that requires a portfolio and an audition as part of the admissions process.

Alicia looked cheerful and energized in a way that she hadn’t at the end of her time at FDMS when she was generally sullen and pouty. She was applying to a competitive high school which required her to think about her talents and her future in a way that was not necessary in the middle to high school transition at FDMS. She was out, at night, with her *mom*. Could the masculine hegemonic behavior and the “girl drama” I had observed at FDMS be absent from her new school? Was it possible that Alicia had ended up in a more gender equitable environment? I concluded that this was unlikely and also, almost irrelevant. She is a girl and regardless of which school she attends she will still be forced to negotiate gender inequity. *Education Week* reported in February 2015 that the U.S. Department of Education has found New York City public schools to be in violation of Title IX. Specifically the article states “the district cut girls’ athletic opportunities over recent years and didn’t have a process in which students could request the addition of sports” (Toporek, 2015, upaginated). Outside of school Alicia will have to contend with men degrading her on the bus and cat-calling her on the street. She will not have equal access to employment opportunities, a living wage or to women’s health care, like contraception, without a fight.

In *Radical Possibilities* Jean Anyon argues that in order to address the problems facing urban education we need to look for solutions that are “considerably more comprehensive “ than those typically limited to the realm of education (Anyon, 2005, p. 151). She suggests that these

solutions would extend beyond the boundaries of the classroom and the reach of a schools' chancellor or school board. Anyon asserts that nothing less than a new social movement working to rectify the injustices wreaked on our society such as poverty and racism would begin to address the issues faced in public schools. I draw here on the strength of her belief in this possibility to address the issues of gender injustice in schools as well.

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APPENDIX A: FOCUS GROUP ACTIVITY PHRASES

Group Chat:

Making friends with other girls,
Staying friends with other girls,
Making friends with boys,
Dating,
Finding people I can trust at school,
Ignoring gossip
Talking about things that are important to me in school

lightening round:

Doing well in school,
Paying attention in class,
Getting all my HOWLS points,
Not getting detention,
Feeling good about myself

Alien Invasion phrases:

Girls get a bathroom pass. They leave the room and are gone for 10 or 15 minutes. What are they doing?

Girls sitting in class with their hoods up, staring into space, not doing work. They are not talking or disrupting anyone – they are just not working.

In class a girl is talking to a friend. Teacher tells girl to stop talking and being disruptive. Girl responds angrily “what? I wasn’t doing anything”

Everyone is always talking about the “drama.” What is the drama all about?

What is dating? What does it mean to be dating? Who is dating in your school 6th graders, 7th graders, 8th graders?

I heard about some writing on the bathroom walls. Why write on the bathroom walls? Isn’t this the age of technology?

Tableau

Boy/girl passing each other in the hall
Boy and girl working in a group in class
Boy and girl in cafeteria
Boy and girl on playground

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW GUIDES

Teacher Interviews:

Teachers' Interview protocol

Intro/Background

1. First, choose a pseudonym.
2. How long have you been teaching?
3. Why did you choose to become a middle school teacher?
4. How long have you been teaching at BCS?
5. What drew you to BCS as a teacher?
6. How does BCS compare to other schools you have taught at? Socially, academically, in terms of resources for students?
7. Why do you think students choose to come to BCS?

Gender experience/gender relations questions:

1. What are your thoughts on gender relations (student to student, teacher to student, administration to student) at this school? If you've been at other schools (or have friends at other schools) how do you think it compares?
2. I am specifically interested in the experience of girls in middle school. How would you characterize the experience of girls in this middle school if you had to generalize?
3. What do you think is the biggest issue for girls in this school? What about boys?
4. What does BCS do to address these issues? Could the school do more or do you feel like there is a specific resource that is missing?
5. Something that I have noticed and wondered about is the *non-participation* of girls at certain times. Like, when they are not acting out or talking but just seem to be refusing to do the work. Have you ever noticed that or have any thoughts on what that is about?
6. A couple of teachers have mentioned to me that they think of the school as *boy-dominant*. Do you agree or disagree? Why or why not?
7. Have you ever taught one of the single sex elective courses? What were the differences between the single gender class and the mixed gender class?
8. Do you think your gender matters in terms of how you relate to the students?
9. To what extent do you think students, male or female, are aware of feminism and/or issues related to gender equity like equal pay, etc.? Is it something you think they would be interested in learning more about?
10. Do male and female teachers have different experiences at this school – with students or administration? If so, why do you think that is?

Girl Interviews:

Girls' Interview protocol

Thank you for participating in my research project (again!). As you know my project is about finding out what it's like to be a girl in middle school so basically for this interview I just want you to share your story about being a girl in this school. So don't worry about thinking about "answers" to the questions really just tell me about any stories that my questions make you think of.

1. So first, just tell me a little about yourself. How old are you? What year in school are you? Why did you want to come to BCS? What's one thing I wouldn't know about you from just seeing you at school?
2. Tell me about your experience at BCS so far. What's your favorite part of BCS? What part do you like the least?
3. Tell me about your experience as a girl at BCS – how would you describe that?
4. Tell me about boys and girls in this school. What do you think is the biggest issue for girls at this school? What do you think is the biggest issue for boys?
5. What do you think about the single gender programs in the school like the electives, YMI, if you have ever broken out in gender groups in Crew? Why do you think those programs exist?
6. Can you tell me about a time in which it was really good to be a girl in school? Can you tell me about a time in which it was really not good to be a girl school?
7. If BCS could do one thing for the girls in this school – a program or a resource – what would you want it to be?