SMART GIRLS, HARD-WORKING GIRLS BUT NOT YET SELF-ASSURED GIRLS: THE LIMITS OF GENDER EQUITY POLITICS

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Higher levels of girls and women's participation in targeted areas are widely apparent, particularly in affluent and middle-class sites. Here, we report on research with young middle and upper middle-class high school girls successfully enrolled in non-traditional advanced placement (AP) courses in mathematics, science, and computer programming in a suburban school district in Midwestern USA. Focus group inter-views with 45 of the highest achieving students in this affluent suburb revealed salient inequities and lingering impediments in the struggle for women's equality. Likewise, the limitations of gender equity politics are evident in the co-opting of discourse of privilege and individualism.

Key words: girls' achievement, secondary schools, girls in advanced placement study, AP classes

Une présence accrue des filles dans les cours avancés de mathématiques, de science et d'informatique au secondaire est manifeste, surtout dans les milieux aisés aux É.-U. et dans d'autres pays occidentaux. Cette recherche quantitative, effectuée auprès de jeunes filles de classe moyenne ou supérieure inscrites dans des cours de niveau avancé de mathématiques, de science et d'informatique au secondaire dans un arrondissement scolaire du Midwest américain, révèle des inégalités importantes et des obstacles persistants dans la lutte des femmes pour une pleine égalité, ce qui montre les limites des politiques en faveur de l'équité entre les sexes.

Mots clés : équité entre les sexes, filles et mathématiques avancées, cours de science, cours d'informatique, filles et science, cours de mathématiques

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Gender equity in education evolved from political work that sought overall to illuminate gender bias and widen access for girls and young women in school programs. In the USA, the effort was fueled by the publication in the early 1990s of the groundbreaking report, *How Schools Shortchange Girls,* which exposed wide systematic inequities in girls' education in American schools (American Association of University Women, [AAUW] 1992). It detailed evidence of biased teaching practices, curricular omissions, sexual harassment, unfair testing procedures, and limited access to or lower participation of girls in certain school subjects and programs (AAUW, 1992, 1998; Bryan, 2000; Sadker & Sadker, 1994).

Gender equity advocates have long targeted intervention efforts in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) programs in secondary and higher education. This effort was considerably hastened in the early 1990s when the American Association of University Women (AAUW) and the National Science Foundation (NSF) funded more than 90 million dollars for programs and research in this area (AAUW, 2004). Their efforts continue to attend to the persistent shortage of women and girls in STEM fields and the need for increases in girls' and women's participation in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (Spears, Dyer, Franks, & Montelone, 2004).

Underlying this push for girls' participation in STEM is the central belief that successful academic engagement in these fields of study in high school and college may lead to more lucrative careers for women. Such efforts would result in wider career opportunities for women, a reduction in the persistent salary gap between the sexes, and more female representation in top management (Betz, 1994; National Science Foundation, 1996).

In truth, girls' and women's participation in STEM has increased in recent years as a result of these efforts (Darke, Clewell, & Sevo, 2002). Girls are as likely as boys to enroll in advanced life sciences such as biology and anatomy or advanced mathematics classes. However, they are still much less likely to enroll in advanced physics or computer sciences (AAUW, 2004), and their overall achievement in all these academic areas continues to lag behind their male counterparts (AAUW, 1998, 2004).

These trends indicate a need to more closely examine existing gender equity interventions. Here, I report on research with a group of young women successfully enrolled in high school, advanced placement (AP) courses in STEM subjects as a result of a district-wide incentive program designed to increase all students' participation in AP courses.

BACKGROUND OF THIS STUDY

Steady increases in the participation of girls as compared to boys in advanced placement courses for the suburban school district in this study occurred when a weighted grade incentive was implemented four years prior to this study. Girls steadily increased participation in advanced mathematics, science, and computer technology classes from the year 2000 through 2004.

Originally, school district officials sought to increase student participation in advanced placement courses in their high school, college-preparatory track through the use of weighted grade incentives. Previously, the district's Board of Education expressed specific concern over the comparatively low level of student participation in rigorous high-school course work. Although 92 per cent of the graduating seniors in this district eventually attended post secondary education, only 20 per cent (21% of the males and 20% of the females) participated in the available AP courses.

AP classes give students opportunities to complete college-like course work while in high school. At the conclusion of AP courses, students can take an AP exam that may result in some credit hours in higher education. These courses are often considered to be a significant predictor of college success (Adelman, 1999). Today, debates about availability and exclusivity of these courses prevail and many are urging schools to encourage more diverse and wider student participation in AP classes (Borja, 2001; Leonard, Blasik, Dilgen, & Till, 2003; Viadero, 2001).

To encourage students to participate in these highly rigorous courses, this school district used a new formula to weigh student cumulative grade-point averages. Weighted grades reward students for participation in AP courses by adjusting the overall weight of the final grade given for each class. A value of .025 was added to students' semester GPA for each AP course students completed. As a result,

participation in these courses increased dramatically over a four-year period as noted in the quantitative data collected from 2000 to 2004 (Herdrich, 2004). This treatment, which encouraged much wider participation among girls as compared to boys, was statistically significant across gender lines. Girls responded much more vigorously to the grade incentive in each subsequent year of implementation, rising from 20 per cent to just over 40 per cent during the four-year period. More girls enrolled in more advanced courses and they sustained their enrollment over time, increasing participation by enrolling in additional courses by 87 per cent (Herdrich, 2004). Boys' participation, on the other hand, remained steadfast at 21 per cent throughout the four-year incentive intervention. The qualitative inquiry here sought to better understand the gendered aspect of this phenomenon.

I was especially intrigued in these gendered differences. My interest in this work stemmed from my own gendered high-school, university, and career experiences and the experiences of countless young women and girls that I have mentored in my career over the past 25 or more years. Although a generation removed from these students and the particular experiences reported here, I was hopeful about the apparent dramatic changes that seemed to have occurred since my own high-school experiences in the mid-1970s. My schooling and subsequent career choices were laced with incidents of gender discrimination, sexual harassment, and restrictions of access to certain fields and high status positions. Although I have achieved some status as a university faculty researcher, I do not feel that sexism and gender discrimination are yet memories of a distant past. Likewise, as a woman from a working-class background and a first generation college graduate, I wondered how the politics of social class and gender intersect in this very affluent school setting.

In this article, I describe a follow-up study of the two high schools within a selected school district. This research posed the following questions: How do girls describe their experiences as students in advanced placement science, mathematics, and other rigorous classes in a highly competitive suburban high school? Why are incentives (i.e., weighted grade structures) important in the encouragement of girls to enroll in

such classes? Why does the weighted grade incentive appear to be more successful for girls than boys?

The setting is an affluent suburb of a large Midwestern city in the United States. Residents are predominately white, middle-class, and professional or executive social class status. Students in the district, with one of the highest academic proficiency test scores of any state within the USA, enjoy benefits afforded by ample resources and strong community support. The overall data collected on girls' success in school and subsequent college placement suggests that the goals of gender equity have been achieved here. The study here, however, tells a more complicated story.

METHODOLOGY

Data were collected in focus group interviews held in May 2004 across the two high schools within the district. Guidance counselors placed a call of invitation to final year students enrolled in two or more AP courses. Volunteers whose participation in AP classes increased over the course of their four-year, high-school study were given priority of inclusion.

Eight focus groups, segregated by gender, were held in all. Four all-female and four all-male focus groups met separately with the two researchers at each site. In this article, I report only the data from the all-female focus groups. Each focus group was 60 minutes in duration with five or six participants per interview. School personnel arranged groups into academic standing and levels of participation at the suggestion of guidance counselors, who indicated concern that some might be intimidated in heterogeneous groups. Students who participated in one or two AP courses and placed beneath the 10th percentile rank in their school were placed together in groups but separated from groups in which students were within the top 10 per cent rank and had enrolled in three or more AP classes. All students in this study except one girl fitted into the top quartile of the school's rank for grade 12.

Focus group data were transcribed verbatim. A total of 45 students participated: 21 females and 24 males. All the females were of white European descent, except one who was of East-Indian heritage. All males except one, who was Asian American, were of white, European descent.

All were middle-class and/or professional or executive social class status. This population is somewhat indicative of the surrounding community that is 86 per cent white, European descent. (The stark absence of Hispanic, Native American, or Black students from AP courses is startling, and, unfortunately, a trend among AP programs across the USA [Klopfenstein, 2004; Lipman, 1998; Oakes, 1985; Spring, 1994]).

Focus groups were semi-structured with a set of six questions. Participants were asked to answer each question initially by turn in a clockwise process. After everyone had answered the predetermined question, all were invited to offer to the group insights regarding the questions or responses. This semi-structured procedure helped ensure opportunities for all to respond, at least initially. The interview questions included the following: What factors influence your course selection in high school? How has the Board of Education's decision to apply weighted scores to courses influenced your decision to take these courses? What have been the primary benefits or disadvantages relative to your participation in these courses? Do you believe the incentive of weighted grades has affected the decision making of boys and girls differently? Why or why not? After participants answered this last question, we responded with a summary of the findings from the initial, weighted-grade incentive research project (Herdrich, 2004). Typically, one of the researchers would say, "The actual pattern indicates that girls' selection of AP courses more than doubled in number since grade weighting began. Boys' participation, on the other hand, has not changed much at all. Why do you think this is happening?"

FINDINGS

All interview data were initially coded and then further subsumed into the four general descriptive themes: incentive, teacher skill, and relationship; merit and the politics of privilege; problems of self-confidence and image; and persistent gender constructs and bias.

Incentive, Teacher Skill, and Relationship

The system of weighted grading that district administrators implemented gave many of these young women the added incentive they needed to take the rigorous AP courses. Grade point averages (GPA) are part of the

everyday discourse among students in these highly competitive schools because admissions to top-ranking universities are secured through high GPAs. A high GPA is strongly related to elevated social status in both schools. When these young women realized that their GPA would be boosted through participation in weighted AP courses, they were inspired to take even more AP courses.

The young women responded almost uniformly to our query about the factors that influenced their decisions of course study in high school. More than 50 per cent indicated that they selected specific AP weighted courses (AP chemistry, history, and biology) based on their affinity for a teacher, their respect for particular teachers' abilities to teach, and a teacher's willingness to support them as students. These young women were very influenced by teachers' abilities to teach, their support of students, and teachers' approachability and personality.

Clearly, teachers' added encouragement supported girls' participation in addition to the weighted course structure. In each of the female focus groups, consensus related to importance of teacher skill, support, and disposition was evident. Girls placed a heavy emphasis on teacher skills and their relationships with them as factors in their decisions to add AP courses. "Well, a lot of it, too, was [my regard] for the teachers, like I was interested in physics, but I didn't necessarily . . . like Ms. Franklin . . . teachers had something to do with it. Mr. Patterson, I like the teacher, so [I took his class]."

When an instructor change in the AP chemistry class occurred in one school, five of the girls enrolled in this course. As one explained, "A lot [of my decision to take this AP course] had to do with the teacher." Another student said, "I knew the teacher was really nice; even though the class was hard, I felt comfortable . . . with this teacher." Each time a comment like this was made in one of the focus groups, others expressed similar sentiments. Katie said, "I took it [an AP weighted course] because I heard that the teacher was great." In still another interview, Magenta[1] said, "Teachers had a lot to do with it [my choice to take an AP chemistry class]. I look for teachers who can bring it to life. Chemistry was not a subject that I really liked but the teacher really made it interesting. She related it to life." Another respondent said, "I'm not

much of [a] science person, but I love chemistry because of the teachers, so yeah, I took Advanced Chemistry."

Such comments support the resiliency of socially constructed female mores that favor the importance of relationships in life. Interestingly, only one of the young women strongly countered her female peers. She rationalized her different view this way:

> I figure that if I really wanna take a course, I'll take it regardless of whether or not the teacher is known to be good or bad, because I'm interested in the subject, and I think that this class is important, um, so I kind of set that aside and just took courses that I knew I was gonna need later in life . . . that's a life lesson. You're gonna have to get along with teachers that you [are] not going to like. (Angelica, focus group interview)

This sentiment did draw comments from other young women who also expressed a desire to take challenging courses to better prepare for the rigor of college work. For example, Caitlin said, "The main reason I took the course schedule I did was because I wanted something that would challenge me. I mean, I knew that whatever college I'd go to, they would really like a strong preparatory schedule." In another interview another young woman said,

> My motive for taking a lot of the advanced . . . classes was to get the more in-depth curriculum . . . to prepare me for what I wanted to go into. [I wanted to] have the firmest grasp on the material before getting in, so that I [might have] a head start . . . a jump on things when I get there. (Magenta, focus group interview)

In each of the female groups, the need to take more difficult classes in preparation for college work was apparent. Girls also said that they took a class because of their interest in the topic. Caitlyn told us, "I think that a lot of the AP and Honors courses I took were in subjects that I was really interested in, like biology or history." Girls pursued topics of interest to them regardless of difficulty, particularly if they viewed this as helpful or important to their future college area of study or success in college.

At points in each of the female focus groups, discourse would sometimes shift dramatically when an opposing view was brought into the

discussion. There was much hesitancy among the girls when bringing forth a contrary view. Once it surfaced, there was always some support for the opinion and a conciliatory view expressed by others. Traditional gender socialization processes were certainly at work here. Support, personality, relationships, and disposition continued to be of innermost importance mostly to the girls.

Merit and the Politics of Privilege

Of the 21 young women in this study, all increased their participation in AP classes by adding at least one additional course each year. Many added more in each subsequent year of the weighted incentive. However, they were reluctant to admit that they took the courses purposefully to raise their GPA. Initially, only 2 of the 21 young women openly admitted doing so. The remaining 19 took the "high road" and proclaimed indifference to the incentive measure, saying that they would have taken the classes regardless of the added weight. They claimed to take the courses to be challenged, or because they liked the subject area, or respected the teacher, or thought a course was important in their preparation for college. Three even vehemently expressed opposition to the weighted grading process.

Sixty per cent of the young women expressed dismay over the practice of taking full schedules of weighted classes simply to bolster GPA. Any mention of a purposeful strategy of taking weighted AP courses to augment their GPA seemed an affront to most of these young women when such a strategy was hinted at in the focus groups. But, as we discovered, it was not entirely due to a strong ethical code as they purported. Those most opposed to the use of weighted grades were those with very strong GPAs (usually a perfect 4.0) before the incentive measure. These once-highest ranking young women expressed remorse over the need to now compete more vigorously and purposefully with an even larger group of students. Some felt forced to add the AP weighted classes simply to retain their class rank, even if they had not wanted to take these rigorous classes in the first place. As one young woman said,

> It was important for me to get into the top three [class rank], because everyone was taking a full schedule of weighted classes . . . I would have been more interested in maybe beginning another language like Spanish or Latin [most language arts and foreign language AP courses remained unweighted classes], but I couldn't afford to. (Gretchen, focus group interview)

Because weighted grading held the possibility of a higher than 4.0 indicator for class rank, this young woman feared losing rank as one of the top three ranked students in her school. Her participation in AP weighted classes came with some reluctance. Although this response could be construed as a negative by-product of the incentive programs, it also speaks to the unmasking of privilege that select students enjoy and the residual resentment wrought by wider access and greater participation of others. In one of of the female groups, a participant expressed clear frustration over the inclusion of students in their classes who did not have the same high degree of standards or records of achievement as themselves. Thereafter, in this same group, a few complaints invariably surfaced about other students who were placed in AP courses but were not as smart, as deserving, or as capable as they, the former high achievers. Some of these girls complained that the classes became too large or the curriculum too watered down. Far from embracing a more inclusive politic, the addition of new contenders threatened the small band of incumbents who quickly resorted to reverberations of resentment and insult of others.

On the other hand, 12 of the 21 young women (more than 50%) admitted that their GPA had gone up as a result of the weighted course incentive, although they tried to mention this in an off-handed way. "Oh, yeah, my GPA did go up, which, like others said [in this interview], it's nice. It's nice to see it on your report card." Another told us her class rank went from 26th to 6th in her class, a fact that opened up many more scholarship and college admission possibilities. Still another said, "It wasn't until the weights were in place that [it mattered]. Now, I really like it. It has really helped me with my rank." These admissions came with some reluctance, at least in the female groups, because a verbal code of high ethics was used to perhaps camouflage the fear of privilege lost.

Problems of Self- Confidence and Image

Problems of self-image and overall diminished confidence were prominent among the female groups and came out in every one of the four female focus group interviews. They expressed concern about their confidence in their academic abilities, and felt that boys were much more confident, if not boastful. Katie, for example, told us that her brother came home from school and did nothing while, on the other hand, she felt compelled to work very hard to prove to others that she was as smart as he was. Sarah related an incident in her AP calculus class in which she became aware of differences between her and a male classmate. When she compared her notes to his, she noted how much more extensive her preparation for class was than his, even though their grades were similar. She explained, "When he gets the concept, he just moves on. It might almost be a confidence thing. I am always afraid that I'll learn something wrong. Guys can get the concept and move on." After Sarah's comment, Katie concurred, "I will doubt myself, too. A lot of girls doubt . . . just to be sure, we do a little extra. Guys are definitely more confident." This phenomenon is also well documented in the literature (Lundeberg, Fox, & Puncochar, 1994; Margolis, Fisher, & Miller, 2000; Sax, 1995).

Young women were apt to openly reveal doubts over their abilities, to be overly concerned with image, and to display a lack of overall confidence. This expression of doubt was particularly true when we discussed those classes that typically had fewer female participants such as advanced physics, chemistry, and computer science. Insecurities were expressed in a number of ways. Some focused on the need to bolster their skills and prepare for the rigors of college work, although they knew they were ranked among the top achievers in the entire state. Others expressed apprehension about their future college studies and shared strong compulsions to study harder, challenging themselves to achieve more.

Magenta told us, "I have a weird kind of complex, where . . . I don't like knowing that there is a more challenging class out there . . . it would irritate me." Other participants in this interview echoed these sentiments. "I want to take the most difficult thing that I know I can handle." Quite a few of these young women expressed a strong need to test their competencies over and over, as a measure, we thought, that safeguarded

them in these non-traditional subject tracks. They clearly used the weighted AP opportunities as part of a solid preparation for college-level work, a strategy that seemed to ease their apprehension over the expectations of the class as well as unforeseen future university work. Advanced study was a valuable means to gain skills *and* ease the anxieties they feared for their futures.

Five of the young women explicitly stated their fear of or gave examples of other girls' fears, particularly about the level of difficulty in AP weighted classes. For example, one young woman told this story about her sister,

> My sister was one of those timid about . . . what classes she would take because she wasn't sure she could make an 'A' in it, and she wanted to, you know, and she didn't want to sacrifice . . . she was just very, very afraid. . .but once they started weighting, I think her senior year, like, some of her fear was gone, like, she was okay with taking Advanced Chem . . . even if she got a B in it.

When one of us asked her why her sister was so afraid to get a 'B', she continued,

> She was just afraid of getting 'B's like . . . I think she's a perfectionist but just afraid to get B's. Like it wasn't, there was no scholarship or anything on line, but it was just funny because . . . she just, you know, was very nervous about getting 'B's but you did see that once there were weighted grades, and once there was compensation, a lot of that fear of taking those classes was gone. (Sarah, focus group interview)

When we asked one group of young women if they were more fearful of getting B's or if there was some stigma attached to getting a B for them as compared to the boys, one said:

> Yes, I think so [there is some stigma] and I think they [girls] take it more personally, like I get a 'B', that reflects on me, and how smart I am, and how well I'm doing, but I think guys just say, " I got a 'B', okay, I got a 'B'. [Girls] don't wanna jeopardize it as much, so the weighted grades help out with that. (Caroline, focus group interview)

These concerns of image were strikingly different for girls than for the boys. Girls demonstrated a stronger need to be perceived as successful and competent by their peers and teachers. They were very concerned with appearance and worked very hard to project an image of being smart. Importantly, they felt that they had to work harder than males to be taken seriously and regarded as smart. There was much more pressure on them to be successful than boys. They feared being labeled as a dumb girl when enrolled in courses that were traditionally male-dominated. They worked hard to look intelligent by selecting courses carefully and working extra hard to succeed in them. As one young woman told us, "Girls care more about what others think, girls are high achieving in academics [in this school]. Generally they are high achievers in many areas."

> Girls are more concerned with their GPA and with how they are presented. They care about how they look and their achievement. Guys don't care about how they look. But, girls view GPA as an extension of how they are presented. Even without being weighted. (Debbie, focus group interview)

When we asked others in Debbie's focus group if they worried about their image as smart girls, they all agreed that they shared these same feelings. This topic circulated through the female focus groups. Girls work carefully to maintain a strong, positive image as they navigate these male-dominated terrains. They walked a thin line between success and the fear of failure or disappointment, working hard to project an image of confidence and competency. They saw themselves as trail blazers who must act carefully with "our chance to get ahead," as one explained. Lingering self-doubts were common, although, initially, most were reluctant to admit it. Once they realized that the focus group was a safe place for such admissions, the reiterations of doubt and lower confidence circulated in every single group. As our questions probed deeper into gender differences, they opened up and shared more of their private thoughts and experiences. This occurrence certainly points to the need for safe spaces for such talk as well as the prevalence of a competitive, individualistic discourse that finds disfavor with such sentiments.

Failure for these young women (usually perceived by them as a B, or a very rare C) was tied strongly to their self-confidence and self image.

Svet, for example, told us that girls care more about their GPA than males and that before grades were weighted, she greatly feared getting B's. The weighted system of grading made her feel more confident to try harder classes. Jane, for example, gave this explanation along with some apology for her 3.3 GPA.

> I'm not a very good student. I was struggling at a 3.3 GPA. Now I have a 3.5. I'm not a shining star, especially in this school. I was always ashamed of my GPA. I didn't want to associate myself with [others]. I didn't hate myself, but I wasn't proud of myself either. (Jane, focus group interview)

Later, in the same interview,

> I lost my 4.0 in my junior year. My self-worth was shot. I felt utterly stupid. With a friend of mine [a male], he didn't try very hard to get [the grades]. I am amazed at how much more I have to try [than he does]. My self-worth is based on my GPA. (Sarah, focus group interview)

Olivia's comment regarding her AP computer science class is particularly revealing. "In my class, we are now down to two girls. You have to work hard to not fall behind because then you are viewed as a dumb girl who doesn't get computers."

Gendered Constructs and Bias

Gender constructs and gender bias are related to these participants' failure to challenge constructed notions of gender, to engage in discourse that accepts gender discrimination, and to deny inequities of gender in social relations. Gender constructs, I maintain, are determined and negotiated within particular social relations while gender bias involves specific limitations assigned to others on the basis of gender alone. The first notion specifies that males and females have fundamentally different roles or constructs in society based on gender and these roles are socially constructed while gender bias depicts unfair treatment of girls on the basis of their gender alone (Lorber & Farrell, 1991). A persistent adherence to socially constructed gender roles and an absence of critique of gender biases were revealed by both males and females in this study.

Certainly, these young women understood that they were disadvantaged as females at some level. However, even in these gender-segregated groups, it took some time for them to admit their feelings and to feel safe enough to initiate any critique of the status quo. This reluctance speaks to the insidious silencing of all women in society, the enduring patterns of gender discrimination, and the continued overall oppresssion within patriarchy. As a result, *making changes* for these girls meant focusing their efforts inward to change themselves rather than outward to change the structures that surround and constrain them. Individual changes consisted mainly of higher goals for their individual success and more self-imposed rigor and discipline, but little expectation of social change.

They knew they could not afford to take as much for granted as their male counterparts. They needed to work harder because they were girls. As Svet told us, "I know so many overachieving girls. All the girls I know, as a matter of fact." Debbie agreed, "Girls need to prove themselves more, to show their intelligence. They are judged more on their achievement and on getting good grades." Amie concurred, "It is harder for girls to get into these classes, so they have to be more academically competitive than guys." Caroline told us, "Girls' goals are set. We're driven because . . . I'm driven because in engineering, only 16 per cent are girls. I knew if I went into it, I had to work harder than the guys." Likewise, Amie, who is also planning to major in an engineering field, told us that because only so many slots in the field were available for women, she found it imperative to work hard to earn a slot.

Girls also indicated that they had to conduct themselves in different ways than the boys. They had to prove their worth by doing more, working harder and more purposefully for recognition.

> I think girls have to work harder to get acknowledged and to achieve. Guys are viewed as well rounded if they take an AP course and do one sport. Girls take three AP classes and a sport and it is viewed as normal. (Penny, focus group interview)

This lack of recognition of their achievement and inadequate acknowledgement of their hard work infused every focus group. Debbie explained, "I was on the swim team all four years of high school. We

were the conference champs but the football team and boys' sports are the centre of attention. It says that, 'we'll let you have your sports team, but we aren't really going to care about it.'" Amie voiced similar sentiments: "All of the accomplishments of girls are not recognized. The guys do something pretty good and everyone goes crazy. Girls do it everyday and it is never recognized." Jane made this claim,

> I can see it in my own family. My cousin gets a lot more leniencies. He didn't try as hard as I do. Boys will be boys, right? If I lagged behind, people would think I'm not okay. It's the same with boys and teachers. Teachers seem willing to push the boys more than they push the girls. Girls are just expected to be good. (Jane, focus group interview)

Girls felt they had to work harder and longer to gain the acceptance or recognition that is readily afforded to boys. Meanwhile, they also needed to maintain some traditional gender expectations that conflicted with their goals and achievements. Penny explained,

> It seems to me that things are changing. Now women want to work [but] we just add that to everything else we are expected to do . . . be soft-spoken, submissive but hard driving, too." Svet added, "Women are multi-taskers. Women do the chores, make dinner . . . [they] balance jobs and family and have to be both responsible and accomplished. (Penny, focus group interview)

Debbie agreed and told us she felt that girls need to be smart and pretty, too. She gave an example from a recent incident in which she noticed that other students commented that a popular female television news reporter was "smart and pretty." She believed women are judged on their appearance much more often than males.

Girls also thought that boys were indulged more by adults, with much more mercy afforded to them. Kimberly said, "Boys will be boys, but if I lagged behind people, I'm not okay. Like, boys with the teachers. Teachers are more willing to push the boys than push the girls. Girls are just expected to be good." The young women also believed that teachers gave much more encouragement for success to males than to females. Teachers expected girls to do well without the same levels of encouragement. Finally, some remarked that the guys knew better how to "play

the system" and were more inclined to do so to reap the rewards available to them.

Competition for class rank and coveted scholarships was high among both males and females and a pervasive school culture of high expectations and scholarly competition certainly prompted rivalry among all students; however, these were manifested in particular ways among girls. Although the young women were very competitive, they did not act out openly in competitive ways during the interviews. If a girl were outwardly competitive or boastful, others in the groups viewed her as an anomaly, an assertion based on observations and comments made during the interviews. When asked about these gender differences, one girl described herself as "kinda like *atypica*l [for a girl] in that I am outwardly competitive." In fact, Magenta was the one who had earlier remarked that she took the weighted classes especially to ramp up her GPA.

One of the most compelling findings was the revelation made by several girls that they viewed themselves to be in competition with other females, not with the males in their classes. These young women defended their need to compete with one another for the finite number of spaces allocated for them in these male-dominated classrooms. For example, in one of the focus groups, Maggie said, "I am more competitive with the girls."

After Maggie's assertion, the other five girls in this group readily agreed with her. Boys, they maintained, were endowed with rights to participate in AP classes and they were assured acceptance into high-ranking universities and colleges. Fewer slots in these advanced classes and related male-dominated professions were reserved for them. Jane remarks, "I feel more competition with another girl than a boy, I feel more pressed if another girl is better than me." In another of the focus groups, Debbie said,

> When you compete with girls, you compete on skills. When you compete with guys, it is based on the fact that you are not a man. There are still instances in that you could be 10 times better and he still has the advantage, so it doesn't matter. Maybe not necessarily school-wise, but you know that sometime in the future it will come up . . . Looming in the back of your mind, you know it will happen to you. (Debbie, focus group interview)

CONCLUSION

In the past three decades, the gender equity movement has been widely embraced in the USA and other Western countries. Although the term, gender equity, is said to have emanated from an acknowledgment of pervasive inequities in society stemming from the systematic devaluetion and absence of the thoughts, actions, and abilities of women, the movement today is manifest mainly in the access of opportunity for girls and women into previously male-dominated, high-status, academic, professsional or skilled fields and careers. Achieving true gender equality, however, requires challenging the underlying assumptions of gender within society itself (Goulding & Cleeve, 1998) and can not be realized simply through measures of access, or additions and inclusion of women.

Despite decades of work and a wider public discourse of gender equality, even the most privileged of young women in American public schooling systems do not see themselves as fully equal to their male peers. A coordinated effort to redress deeply embedded inequities has not occurred and the status quo has not yet been challenged.

Moreover, our research indicates that a depoliticized gender equity movement may yield unintended consequences. The young women of privilege queried here are far more likely to succumb to the standards that men lay before them than they are of forging new paths of liberation for themselves and those who may follow them. These young women certainly had high expectation for themselves and worked furiously to fit into an already established system. They were reluctant to share their accomplishments with others and held fast to a promise of individualistic rewards. The urgency of their own need to succeed and be included did not reflect on privilege, inclusion, or exclusion. Nor did their own struggles sway them necessarily to feel empathic toward others or connected to others in some collective struggle. Despite their readiness to identify the unfairness of gender roles and norms, they largely acquiesced to a patriarchic model that favors fierce individualism, competition, and personal entitlement. Certainly, they were not eager to critique the system. On the contrary, they worked very hard to become deserving members. In effect, the existing system has successfully seduced these

young women into its fold, and young women's partici-pation in these new areas has done little to shake the conventional structures.

Finally, when we regard socio-economic class and issues of race in addition to gender, we see the futility of a gender equity effort that does not consider issues of race and class. Thorne (as cited in AAUW, 2001) stated, "One has to ask which girls, which boys . . . . The needs and problems of low-income African American boys and girls are quite different . . . from the needs and problems of white, middle-class girls and boys"(p. 2). We can no longer generalize the lines of gender in an abstract way. Although it might seem daunting to tease out the intricacies of multiple identities within our own research, it is essential that we do so with rigor and attention to the complexities of these very issues. Access to the opportunities described in this research is undeniably rare among lower-income, white, African-American, Hispanic, or others from minority groups. Although gender remains a crucial site of struggle that certainly bears relevance, generalizing only along lines of gender does little to broaden an understanding of the far-reaching effects of oppression and privilege in the world today. Gender must be one of the multiple launching sites to lead to a wider analysis and broader intervention for social justice and full equity.

In this study I have highlighted students who experience many advantages, advantages not readily available to most students in other schools. Surely, difficulties of inequities for this study imply the likelihood that even greater, more complex struggles are at work in the lives of contemporary youth elsewhere. It also speaks to the compelling need for new research that works to understand how race and social class privilege operate through these school programs and among communities of youth.

To truly achieve equity, there must be a willingness to usurp the underlying assumptions we ourselves maintain in light of these sought-after but highly exclusive structures that have worked to successfully exclude many women on the basis of gender, race, class, religion, age, location, disability, and/or sexual orientation.

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NOTES

[1] All participants in this study selected their own pseudonym for use in any written reports, including the transcriptions of the interviews. Some unusual names resulted. These were used to protect the confidentiality of all participants.

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