RMLE Online
Research in Middle Level Education

Micki M. Caskey, Ph.D., Editor
Portland State University
Portland, Oregon

2008 • Volume 32 • Number 1 ISSN 1940-4476

Reading Girls: Living Literate and Powerful Lives

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Abstract

In this qualitative study, the authors merge two bodies of previously separated scholarship: (1) a socio-cultural understanding of adolescent girls in light of the shifting meaning of ideal girlhood, and (2) the participation and success of adolescent girls in school-based literacy activities. They apply these fields of inquiry to explore the following questions: (1) What does it mean to be a young woman/girl in middle school? (2) What does it mean to be a young woman/girl reader in middle school? (3) What does it mean to be a young woman/girl in literacy circles and discussion groups? To answer these questions, the authors collected observational and interview data in two classrooms (one grade 6 and one grade 8) from January to June. From the analysis of the data, the authors identify profiles that typify the girls with whom they interacted, capture the girls' roles during literature discussion groups and other classroom events, and frame the influence of teachers' actions on the girls.

Introduction

Girls. Reading. Reading girls. Girl power. Instead of posing these ideas as having defined boundaries and unique ideas linked to them, we think they warrant a consolidated consideration. Therefore, we conducted a qualitative study that merges these two bodies of previously separated scholarship: (1) a socio-cultural understanding of adolescent girls in light of the shifting meaning of ideal girlhood, (2) the participation and success of adolescent girls in school-based literacy activities.

Often the first body of literature remains theoretically focused (Inness, 1998; Walkerdine, 1990), and when it is empirically applied, the focus is often on popular culture (e.g., Inness, 1999), extracurricular activities (Adams & Bettis, 2003), or a more general understanding of female identity in school (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Orenstein, 1994). Specific academic practices are rarely considered.

Recently, best-selling author and Harvard psychologist, Dan Kindlon, considered the current status of girls in *Alpha girls: Understanding the new American girl and how she is changing the world* (2006), and argued that a new psychology of girls (i.e., a psychology of emancipation) has produced a girl very different from the girl in crisis who dominated the media in the early 1990s. This alpha girl is poised to change the world, economically, politically, and socially. Kindlon viewed this new girl as a hybrid, one who embodies the best traits of masculinity and femininity. Thus, she is confident, assertive, competitive, autonomous, future oriented, risk taking, as well as collaborative, relationship oriented, and not obsessed with boyfriends or her physical appearance.

Kindlon's (2006) tone is celebratory and quite a contrast to the manner in which girls have been portrayed in past years in both popular and scholarly works. During the past 15 years, girls have been alternately framed as passive, without voice, sassy, slutty, and mean. What do these changing discourses of girlhood mean to girls? How might these changing discourses of girlhood play out in their school practices? How might female teachers understand their work in light of these discourses? This leads to the second body of relevant scholarship.

Those scholars who consider adolescent girls' literacy activities often neglect the discursive practices of ideal girlhood and investigate girls' literacy practices as if they exist in a gender-blind vacuum. When literacy scholars do consider gender, the lines of inquiry take several turns. Some note the gendered predispositions held by boys and girls toward reading (Appleman, 2006). For example, Smith and Wilhelm (2002) unveiled the practical way that many young men look at things they do. For these boys, and as the title of this work suggests, "reading don't fix no Chevys" and therefore reading holds less value in their lives. Girls lean toward "real stuff." For them, this includes attention to their emotional and lived experiences (Smith, 2000). Other scholars consider in and out of school reading (e.g., Hull & Schultz, 2002). Some scholars explore gendered discursive practices (Alvermann, Commeyras, Young, Randall, & Hinson, 1997), while others consider whether a classroom culture might influence patterns of gendered behaviors (e.g., Hinchman, Payne-Bourcy, Thomas, & Olcott, 2002). Though the influence of class (i.e., a student's economic position in the wider community) often finds inclusion in a broader and cultural consideration of literacy practices (e.g., Jones, 2006), directly considering the influence of girls' concepts of themselves on their accomplishments as readers in public middle schools forges new ground.

As many scholars of girlhood have documented (Adams 1999; Bettis & Adams, 2005; Budgeon, 1998; Harris, 2004a, 2004b; Hunter, 2002; Inness, 1998; McRobbie, 1993; Mitchell, 1995; Nelson & Vallone, 1994; Walkerdine, 1993), ideal girlhood is constantly being rewritten.. The early 1990s concern for our "girl poisoning culture" (Pipher, 1994) and the worrisome research published by the American Association for University Women (AAUW, 1992; 1998) positioned girls as passive victims, ones who lost their voice during adolescence. However, at the end of the century, a Girl Power movement, embraced by both girls and corporate America, positioned girls as smart, sassy, assertive, and independent (Bettis & Adams, 2005; Harris, 2004a, 2004b). Feminist scholars have argued that new subject positions are being made available to girls that provide a counter discourse to the girl as passive victim.

Our qualitative study builds on these ideas by exploring how girls in grades 6 and 8 define themselves as young women, particularly in relation to their understandings of "ideal girlhood." Then, the project turns to how these adolescent girls define themselves as young readers. Here, the goal is to understand how the cultural model girls present for themselves in their personal lives apprentices (Lave & Wenger, 1991) them for membership in classroom literacy experiences. The following questions initially guided this study: (1) What does it mean to be a young woman/girl in middle school? (2) What does it mean to be a young woman/girl reader in middle school? (3) What does it mean to be a young woman/girl in literacy circles and discussion groups?

Theoretical Framework

For this inquiry, we employ the theoretical tools of both critical feminism and feminist post structuralism to help us understand this contradictory space of girlhood and how girls live their lives in classrooms and as readers. Drawing from a rich body of critical feminist research (e.g., Devault, 1996; Fine & Weis, 1998; Marshall, 1997, 1999), we nestle our study at the juncture of cultural and structural explanations for life in school. Critical feminism reminds us of how race, ethnicity, and particularly social class in our study are markers of power and privilege. Further, critical feminism keeps us focused on the everyday experiences and material realities of the girls we observed (Devault; Lather, 1991).

Following Davies (1989, 1993, 1999), Walkerdine (1990), Kenway and Willis (1998), and Harris (2004a, 2004b), we also employ feminist poststructuralism as a theoretical tool for examining how girls make sense of their own identities as girls and as readers amidst a changing gender landscape. Feminist poststructuralism encouraged us to explore how girls described ideal girlhood and how they negotiated the traditionally feminine marker of "nice." We argue that both of these discourses, that of ideal girlhood and nice, play a part in how girls see themselves as readers and how they participate in

reading within and outside of the classroom. Feminist poststructuralism does not position girls as passive beings but rather as persons located within history, produced in a do-it-yourself philosophy, and practiced in that philosophy. We move these understandings forward to the roles of middle school girls in their language arts classrooms.

Literatures Reviewed

The claim that today's girls are living a "psychology of emancipation" is an optimistic one, especially when juxtaposed to the claims made about girls over the last 15 years. During the early 1990s, the image of girls was one of passive and voiceless victims who suffered in a girl poisoning culture. According to Mary Pipher, author of the 1994 best seller *Reviving Ophelia*, girls' potential was swallowed in a Bermuda Trianglesque society. Research findings from the American Association of University Women on the status of girls along with other popular books such as *Schoolgirls* (Orenstein, 1994) and *Between Voice and Silence* (Taylor, Gilligan, & Sullivan, 1995) led to a plethora of organizations, activities (i.e., Take Our Daughters to Work Day), and curriculum changes that would address the needs of girls. Scholars who looked at girls' literacy also acted on a need to move from studying literacy as a psychological process to a social practice. Within this cultural and social perspective, gender mattered. For example, Barbieri (1995) came to see her view that "they [her students] were individuals more than they were boys or girls … did them a disservice" (p. 7). She chronicled her interactions with a group of seventh grade girls during a period when she served as their English teacher. She sought to empower these girls to read, write, and simultaneously consider questions of personal importance. These girls, whom Barbieri acknowledged as "privileged," attended an all-girl private school. Barbieri learned quickly that they, in spite of their educational advantages, sacrificed their authentic opinions and feelings in their quest to be an "ideal" girl. Barbieri's belief that "it's the girls who are in the greatest danger of slipping away from us, quietly, unobtrusively, politely slipping away" (p. xi) fueled her quest to offer a curriculum that did better by them as well as to document and report her findings. In the same vein, Cherland (1994) broadened a look at literacy to include a cultural context. She studied seven sixth-grade girls' reading of fiction in and out of school. In her view, gender is a cultural construction and reading, as a social practice, unavoidably involves gender. For these girls, their gender made it acceptable to read and acknowledge the importance of reading to their lives. Their reading of fiction also allowed them to fulfill the social expectations placed upon them. For example, being a friend accompanied being a girl. These girls linked this responsibility by reading books in common, conversing with other girls about the books they read, and lending books to other girls.

By the late 1990s, the girl as victim image had given way to sassy, girly girls with can do attitudes. The Girl Power movement, whose origins emerged from a combination of punk rock music and accompanying alternative lifestyle along with feminist sensibilities, heralded a new type of girl—one who celebrated her femininity and, at the same time, practiced a do-it-yourself philosophy. This new sensibility paralleled increases in girls' participation in sports, popular music, and violent crimes, and their increasing economic influence. Not surprisingly, the Girl Power movement was quickly commodified. Laura Croft, Xena, the Spice Girls, and cartoon superheroes, the Power Puffs, were all seen as a symbolic shift from passive girl to empowered girl.

By the turn of the century, that empowerment had become somewhat problematic. Social critics pointed to girls' promiscuity and "relational aggression" or meanness, particularly toward other girls, as evidence of girls losing the traditional markers of femininity. The popularity of the movies *Mean Girls* and *13* along with the best-selling books, *Queen Bees and Wannabees* and *Sluts*, spoke to these concerns. With Kindlon's (2006) new book, *Alpha Girls*, once again a shift occurred in the landscape of girlhood. Kindlon attributed the emergence of this group of girls to several factors. First, the fruits of the second wave of feminism such as a decrease in stereotypical female media images, the large number of girls who play competitive sports (thanks to Title IX), and the role models of women who have pursued a variety of challenging careers have contributed to the psychology of alpha girls. For Kindlon, the important roles that fathers have taken on in the rearing of children have been significant. In their increased involvement with their children, particularly their daughters, fathers have introduced girls to "male ways of being." These masculine dispositions have been passed on to daughters through fathers' involvement in sports and the sharing of their hobbies and interests. Alpha girls have adopted these masculine skills and dispositions. When these internal changes are combined with a changed social context produced by the women's movement, the

new hybrid alpha girl emerges. Although Kindlon noted that a majority of his data was collected from affluent White girls, he still maintains, "alpha girl psychology … transcends barriers of race and class" (p. xvii). In his view, all girls at the turn of this century and regardless of their race, social class, sexual orientation, geographical location, religious affiliation, or physical capabilities, differ from their female predecessors because they have choices.

The theme of choice is prevalent throughout Kindlon's arguments and much of the Girl Power discourse. Some girls may still suffer from bulimia, depression, and low self-esteem, but generally, girls are the new winners of a drastically changed cultural and social context that offers them unlimited choices. "Girls today have more choices about how to act, who to be, and what is considered 'normal,' culturally sanctioned behavior. This is precisely what their mothers and grandmothers fought for—the ability and freedom to *choose* how to live one's live" (Kindlon, 2006, p. 28, emphasis original).

Investigations of girls' literate lives have also moved forward with more direct consideration of literary and feminist theory. Blackford (2004) interviewed 33 girls from various geographical locations and ethnic backgrounds. She unveiled the importance of aesthetic reading for these girls and its role in expanding their personal and worldviews. However, her work falls short of going into the classroom to understand better the current overlays between girls' sense of themselves as readers in and out of school.

Thus, over the past 20 years, girls have been framed and reframed from passive victims with low self-esteem to Kindlon's (2006) proposed alpha girls who can solve society's political, social, and economic problems. The role of gender in their reading has moved from the background to take a central role. Popular discourses have consequences in how society thinks about and solves social problems and how individual girls make sense of their lives, intellectually and emotionally. However, academics whose work focuses on gendered literacy rarely consider the influence of such popular girlhood discourses on the schooling process and the school discourse of literacy learning.

Finally, the body of information about literacy and young adolescents (e.g., Irvin & Rycik, 2001; Roe, 2004) and, more specifically, the various forms of literature discussion groups contribute in an important way to this project. We limit these comments to literature discussion groups.

The option for reader response to literature takes roots from the work of scholars such as Rosenblatt (1978) and Langer (1995) and shifts reading instruction away from scripted lessons to opportunities for text engagement and exploration. In addition, it moves these explorations from the typical teacher posed questions and student response "discussions" to small group, student-centered exchanges (e.g., Almasi, 1995; Daniels, 1994; Eeds & Wells, 1989; Goatley, Brock, & Raphael, 1995). Across the various versions of literature discussion groups such as Book Club and Literature Circles, basic features emerge: (a) book selection by students, (b) organization of small groups, (c) and discussions intended to foster an enriched grasp of the selected text (Gunning, 2004). These features provide rich opportunities for students, and especially girls, to exert their independence and thought. Interestingly, however, once these scholars characterized the parameters and benefits of literature discussion groups, research has remained silent on their everyday use by typical teachers and students. Therefore, in this study, we address that vacuum between girls' portrayal of themselves and girls' roles as readers in those classrooms that feature a form of literature discussion groups.

Method

We determined that a qualitative design best suited our intention to understand the potential overlaps and digressions between adolescents' female identity and their literacy practices (e.g., Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). First, it captures a way to explore our overall curiosity about student descriptions of themselves and their participation in their language arts classes. As Marshall and Rossman (1989) stated, "in qualitative research, questions and problems for research most often come from real-world observations, dilemmas, and questions" (p. 28). Second, qualitative method provides direction for analyzing the types of information this classroom-based project generated: observations, interviews, and documents. Third, it embraces situated learning environments as a benefit to cultural understanding rather than an interference to it (Schratz, 1993). Finally, qualitative method coincides with our emic stance. As Gall, Gall, and Borg (2005) explained, this involves obtaining "the research participants' perceptions and understanding of their social reality" (p. 548).

Context

We conducted this research in a middle school located in a university town of 26,000 residents in the northwest. The community members whose children attended the school represented a mix of wheat farmers, university faculty, graduate students, blue-collar workers, and white-collar employees. While small and rural in location, the town's diverse community allowed diversity within its student population. Specifically, the school district reported its racial/ethnic demographics as 76% White; 11% Asian/Pacific Islander; 7% Hispanic; 4% Black; and 2% American Indian. Of importance, two teachers in this school, a sixth grade language arts and an eighth grade language arts/social studies teacher, reported their use of literature discussion groups—the literacy event that we intended to target. After meeting with them to explain the goal of our investigation and its features, they willingly agreed to offer their classrooms as our research sites.

Data Sources

To answer our research questions, we acquired data from four sources typical of qualitative analysis: (1) classroom observations, (2) documents, i.e., assignment explanations, scoring rubrics for class assignments, and in-class worksheets, (3) 47 student interviews, and (4) two teacher interviews. To establish continuity and build familiarity with the participants and their classroom context, the first author observed and interviewed in the eighth grade sections and the second author collected data for the sixth grade. Next, we explain the particulars of our collection of these data.

Observations. Our observation period extended from January to June. We attended two sections of each teacher's regularly scheduled language arts periods, a total of four language arts sections. We tried to observe each class section on the days that these teachers planned literature discussion activities. However, this event occurred less frequently than we anticipated. Therefore, we expanded our observations to capture girls' participation in classroom discussions as well as their typical behaviors during a class period. We continued these general and targeted observations until we no longer noted anything not captured in previous observations that related to our research questions. In the end, we tallied 78 observations across these four sections. We created files from the handwritten field notes generated from each observation and entered them into *Ethnograph* (Qaulis Research Associates, 1998), a qualitative data analysis program.

Interviews. We conducted semi-structured interviews toward the end of our classroom observations with students and teachers. The individually conducted and audiotaped student interviews included the girls who submitted a permission form signed by them and their parent or guardian. This resulted in interviews with all but four students in the sixth grade classes ($N = 25$) and 22 girls in eighth grade classes (12 from an honors section and 10 in the general track). During the interviews, we used prepared questions to explore the girls' perceptions of themselves as girls and as participants in literature discussion groups and other classroom events. In keeping with open-ended and qualitative interviews, we used follow-up questions to explore their responses to our prepared questions and to expand upon ideas they mentioned that pertained to our research questions (see Appendix A).

We used informal conversations with each teacher to understand better a day's events and their responses to them. Toward the end of our observation period, we designed prepared questions to guide a more focused exploration of these teachers' perceptions of their female students' attributes and their participation in literature discussion groups and other classroom events (see Appendix B). Like the student interviews, we transcribed our recording of these interviews. Then, we entered all individual interview files into *Ethnograph* (Qualis Research Associates, 1998).

Documents. We collected documents that the students received during our observation period. They included explanations for class projects, activity sheets that students completed, expectations for the literature discussion groups, and scoring rubrics for various assignments. These documents contributed to our understanding of these teachers' planning as well as the students' expectations for completing planned lessons and activities.

Data Analysis

Our analysis of these data proceeded in stages. Once our data collection period ended, we used a subset of these observations and interviews for initial coding (e.g., Lancy, 1993; LeCompte, Millroy, & Preissle, 1992). Next, we compared our open coding schemes and, as appropriate, collapsed them. We met once again to settle on a final set of codes, which we applied in common to our observations and interviews. We again verified our consistent use of our codes. (See Appendix C for the final set of observation codes and Appendix D for the interview codes.) Finally, we created coded files in

Ethnograph (Qualis Research Associates, 1988). We used this software program to aggregate individually coded segments across these data. At times, we counted instances of coded segments and used these frequency counts to make sense of the relative recurrences of certain behaviors or events. Ultimately, we collapsed information across these sources to understand our research questions.

Results: The Girls

Seventy-seven years ago, Virginia Wolfe argued that girls and women needed to have "a room of one's own" where they might find the solitude and privacy to read, think, and write. Since that time, many girls certainly have obtained rooms of their own, but the rooms appear empty. With the passage of Title IX and the Girl Empowerment Movement, many girls now live the new markers of ideal girlhood. For these girls, these markers include their participation in sports and community arts programs and their claims of self-assertiveness and self-confidence. In fact, many of the girls we interviewed demonstrated characteristics of alpha girls, and appeared to draw from both traditionally feminine as well as masculine ways of being.

For example, an eighth grade Honors student, Erica, participates in volleyball, basketball, track, and dance team, which require after-school practices. When asked about her reading practices, she commented, "I read magazines and stuff. I don't really read books as much. … If I read a long book then it takes me a long time and I just want to get to the end of the book." Martie, a sixth grader, voices a comparable concern. As she states, "I'm not like a big reader … I like to do sports and be active." Further, instead of being concerned about whether they were considered "nice," a traditional feminine marker, these girls critiqued the concept. As eighth grader Julian observes, "I think nice is overrated. Beth and Sarah, they're like super nice, but they're really boring … I want to brag about myself. I'm kind of vain." A sixth grader, Marissa, describes herself as "energetic and wild" and considers the term nice to be "kind of a soft word to me. And it seems like I wouldn't use that because I'm not soft."

However, our field notes revealed a more complex and at times contradictory living of normative girlhood in the classroom. Girls who set aside reading for dance or soccer would use extra class time to read. While eighth grade girls spoke out and answered questions in equal numbers to the boys and sixth grade girls dominated literature discussion groups and whole class discussions, these numerical observations were offset by examples of girls acquiescing to boys' supposed intellectual prowess and their support for gender stereotypes. For example, we observed Honors student and class officer Vivian in an eighth grade small group activity with two boys taking the role of secretary and describing the two boys as the "thinkers." Sixth grade Jennifer presented another example of contradictory behavior; while she would take control of a literature discussion group in order to meet the teacher's expectations, she would also leave the group to chat with other girls around the drinking fountain.

Overall, these girls lack a coherent wholeness between their explanations and actions. Their challenge reflects an observation in the adolescent novel, *Criss Cross* (Perkins, 2005): "And any one place can make you go forward, or backward, or neither, but gradually you find all your pieces, your important pieces, and they stay with you, so that you're your whole self no matter where you go" (p. 267). These girls, for now, remain divided between compliance and willfulness, personal activities and personal reading, social proclivities and educational attainment. We use a selection of their profiles to capture the complex interplay of their lives and better pinpoint the import for powerful girls and readers.

Eighth Grade Girls

Kat: Alpha girl. Kat sits at a crowded cafeteria table, which is surrounded by girls who cannot find a seat. Laughter and chatter abound and Kat is in the center of most it. She is an Honors student who is well known by her classmates as well as other students outside the Honors enclave and was elected class vice president at the end of her eighth grade year. She is a tall and slender Chinese American adolescent who consistently wears faded blue jeans with a cotton belt that frequently misses one loop and a tee shirt. In many ways, Kat exemplifies the new alpha girl. She is consistently mentioned by the other Honors students as someone they admire because she is willing to enter the fray of their class discussions. She is an athlete, musician, snowboarder, Honors student, and class officer and is not as concerned about her physical presentation as many other girls are.

When asked to describe herself, she and another Honors female student, state that they are talkative, friendly, active, and smart. A reader is not included in this initial list of descriptors. However, when asked

to describe the ideal girl of today, Kat turns to a book read in sixth grade, *Stargirl* (Spinelli, 2000), and uses the central character to explain the ideal girl of today. "It was this book that we read in sixth grade. It's this girl who's not really pretty or anything. But she's like original. But she's not perfect. She's not like everyone else. She goes out into the desert and she meditates. She's very cool."

Like many of the girls involved in athletics, Kat does not necessarily perceive herself as an athlete. Many girls saw themselves as participants in athletics and as physically active but not as athletes. Both Kat and her fellow interviewee, Val, describe themselves as active although both play soccer. Kat adds that she is a snowboarder and a hiker and Val mentions that she likes to ski. The individualism, competitiveness, and aggressiveness that are supposedly learned during the practice of athletics are not apparent in how Kat describes her role as a soccer team member. In fact, she claims, "my thing about soccer is having friends."

This relationship orientation regarding her sports participation is also central to her understanding of herself as a major classroom discussion participant, one admired by others for offering her ideas. When asked what she liked about herself when she participated in class discussions, Kat responded, "I just like when people agree with me. And the whole class is like, 'Oh yeah, good job Kat.'" Further, in one class discussion, Kat offered stereotypes of female behaviors as her contribution. In discussing *Lord of the Flies*, Kat argues that if the story had been about a group of girls, there would have been much infighting and cattiness. She does not make the connection to the violence that ensues in this novel with the all male character cast.

Although Kat's daily practices demonstrate many of the characteristics of an alpha girl, her understandings of herself and her world do not necessarily confirm that position. In many ways, Kat exemplifies the Girl Power Movement in which girls play with their girliness, their femininity, and simultaneously break gender boundaries and binaries. Kat's reluctance to name herself as an athlete and her understanding of her class contributions and soccer playing as other oriented appear to be traditional female understandings. However, her willingness to put her ideas out there, her lack of interest in traditional displays of femininity, and her playfulness all point to non-traditional female enactments. Perhaps a better way to understand Kat would be to see her as exemplifying Girl Power, but not too much.

Although Kat's life is busy, she does do some personal reading, but even then it is relational. Along with most of her friends ("I don't know anyone who hasn't read them except for like two people. And they want to read them."), Kat loves the *Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants.* Just as the pants travel among all of the characters who are friends, so do the books of the *Sisterhood* series. Kat and her friend Val compare themselves to the female characters and share their views of the various characters.

When asked about the literature that she reads for class, Kat responds that her favorite was *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Her rationale for the *Mockingbird* selection is interesting. Kat claims, "It does have symbolism and I like stuff like that. But it's not as much as *The Lord of the Flies*, and you don't have to analyze it as much."

Molly: Nice girl. In describing whom she is and what she is about, Molly's first comment includes "I like to read books, watch TV, and to hang out with my friends, go shopping, and hang out with my family and take trips." Molly is one of a handful of eighth grade students who when describing themselves included "reader" as an initial descriptor. Further, Molly is particular about what she likes to read. She is enamored with mystery books and selects them based on their covers and then apologizes for that: "I'm kind of bad but I do kind of judge a book by its cover." Her interest in mystery books exclusively, however, precludes her enjoyment of the books read for her eighth grade class. Her favorite selection was *To Kill a Mockingbird* but that was only because the story contained "more suspense" to it than the others did. However, "when I got into it there was just really nothing to it that I liked." Molly also reads adolescent magazines, subscribes to *Seventeen*, and purchases *Cosmo Girl* and *Teen People*; however, she does not share her reading interests with any of her friends.

During our interview, Molly described herself voluntarily as "nice" without any provoking question. Her nice comment and the fact that she does not engage in any sports or leadership activities speak to her non-alpha status. She maintained that others would describe her as such and defined nice as kind, thoughtful, funny, a good friend, and trustworthy. These traits were difficult to ascertain since Molly rarely talked in class, although she appeared attentive. She stated that she was nervous for any formal

presentation. Generally, "I'm not sure if I participate as much. When it's kind of a really serious topic, then I will maybe throw something out but I'm not always raising my hands." When asked why, Molly responded, "I don't know. Maybe I don't want to answer the question wrong." In a relaxed classroom with a teacher who welcomed discussion, Molly's fear of answering incorrectly speaks to her timidity and perhaps the constraints of nice. However, her interest in discussion around "a really serious topic" speaks to the desire of youth to be engaged in worthy discussions. Her interest in serious topics is also revealed when we asked about how she might construct a literature discussion. Molly wants to talk about what she likes and dislikes about the book rather than the symbolism.

Sixth Grade Girls

Raylene: The quiet thinker. Raylene, recently recognized as Student of the Month, spends her time before class reading or silently observing the more active interplay between other students, especially those between boys and girls. She talks about loving different things but is less able to describe them. Instead, she returns to her reading life. In school, she reads (or rereads) the books that the teacher assigns. When given choice, she turns to the classics, setting aside *The Babysitters Club* for *Jane Eyre*. She considers the literature discussion groups "good" and enjoys "meeting to talk about things," but considers some of the questions less than provocative. She talks about trying to turn a question with a "really right answer" into a wider interpretive frame, but being thwarted because of the truly narrow response that the question dictates. She most appreciates discussion group participants who "seem like they really thought about it [the question] and it [their response] was things that you knew—even if I didn't agree with it." She scorns classmates who "were not really serious and would just say something just totally off the wall." She never raised these stances with her peers or her teacher. In fact, the teacher describes her as "someone you have to look for," hesitates to raise her hand, but "the deepest student I've had," exhibiting "amazing thoughts, amazing insight." The students came to this view more slowly. According to the teacher, "once they figured that out, it was like, everything that came out of this student's mouth, they were like, oh, you're so smart, she's so smart, and I want to be in her group because I know it's going to get done right." These students grasped the link between her thinking and her compliance and were then drawn to her.

Marissa: The boisterous socialite. Previously, we briefly introduced you to Marissa. She represents those girls who, unlike Raylene, make their presence known. It often begins when she first walks in the door and calls to her teacher, "Mrs. Riley, Mrs. Riley." She then reports her drama for the day. Once seated, and before class officially begins, she typically takes out a book and reads. In fact, she describes herself as "an active reader" who is "quiet and calmed down" during that time. However, and in her words, "when I'm not reading I'm wild and energetic" and not a "goody two shoes person." Like Raylene, however, she completes assignments and participates in class events according to guidelines established by the teacher. This mindfulness about doing her work and generally following the rules does not prevent her from stealing time to pass notes, acquiring another student's purse for close examination of its contents, heading to the in-class drinking fountain for a brief exchange with friends, and capitalizing on the short walk to it for further surreptitious exchanges with classmates. She describes her time with the literature discussion group as "good" because she "liked that book and I liked how I could compare myself to her." (Her group read *Olive's Ocean*.) She assumes an active role during these group meetings, two times serving as the leader, the person who writes the discussion questions. She mentions the freedom of being in an all-girl group since she finds it "easier to say things." In a mixed group, as true with a whole class exchange, she "wouldn't say things as personal." She also prefers girls because, in her view, "boys don't listen as well." If given the chance to design literature discussion groups, she would allow the "freedom" that she enjoys during the informal conversations she has with friends. Mostly, though, reading is something she does for herself and in private. "That way it's quiet … It bugs me when people talk when I read because it brings me out of the book." While summer vacation typically provides more personal time, that isn't true for Marissa. As she explains, "I'm normally really busy over the summer. When I do read, I go to camp [and mentions a variety of sports camps that she describes as "slumber camps"] … and normally read before I go to bed just to bring me down from all the things of the day." Overall, Marissa represents those girls who are perky and active, accommodate school practices to these personal attributes, and esteem reading more than they engage in it.

Katrina: The emerging alpha girl. Katrina's life is punctuated by taking the lead and taking things on. However, she places each piece in a box. At school, and especially during the literature discussion groups, she is all business. She becomes impatient with peers who stray from the task at hand. She quickly helps to dispense with the completion of the literature discussion assignments in order to move on. For her, this includes huddling with friends not in her group, flipping through the pages of a magazine, talking about the latest basketball game at the local university, or, if in the library, attempting to read her e-mail. In fact, she notes instant messaging as a favorite out-of-school event. Her father's job as the team trainer contributes to her interest in sports and her athletic ways. She plays team sports at school, takes dancing lessons and plays soccer out of school, and reads only if she can become "committed" to the book. The busyness of her out-of-school life and her commitment to completing in-school assignments, many of which include reading but do not entice her to read more, leave scant time and little interest in personal reading.

Results: The Teachers

These teachers, while different in their demeanor and pedagogical choices, care about their students and their educational opportunities. In the eyes of their colleagues and their building principal, they are good teachers. However, their goals and curricular decisions further reduce these girls' opportunities to explore their intellectual selves and reading lives. For example, while sixth grade teacher Sara Riley values students who assert themselves and appreciates girls with a little "sass," the constraints she places on her use of literature discussion groups hamper these opportunities. She assigns roles, specifies the activities for students to complete, and oversees the students' compliance with these predetermined and exact expectations. Kayla Harper, the eighth grade teacher, presents herself as an older version of an alpha girl because she is an acknowledged leader in the school, a coach, and athlete, and is known for her intellect. She does not necessarily encourage that way of being in her classroom. The Honors girls consistently critiqued her wandering discussions while her general track girls praised her story telling. Neither group of girls was necessarily inspired to achieve more in her integrated English/Social Studies classroom. The following vignettes, driven by what we learned across our observations and interviews with these teachers, further highlight their differences as teachers and the contradictory beliefs and stances they project.

Sara Riley: A planner with classroom goals. Sara, whose husband's and dog's pictures adorn her office, evidences a notable fondness for her role as a teacher. In addition to her sixth grade teaching duties, she also coaches volleyball. However, during this observation period, she did not bring the after school duty or family events into her classroom. While she sometimes attempts to soften the behaviors of some girls, especially when they "make a noise of a big sigh along with a drop of the shoulder attitude and make this face," she primarily focuses on the academic task. She notes a preference for those girls who are "just really kind to each other, kind to their classmates, upbeat, and like school." She recognizes the existence of cliques in her school, but does not believe that group membership is "strictly maintained" or that it complicates her intention to have a warm and caring teaching environment. She is aware of girls' general interest in fiction and considers them, as a group, readers. The daily life in her classroom indicates her advance planning of its events and the control she takes of them. For the event that she labels literature discussions, contradictions arise. She chooses the books, forms the groups, creates and assigns roles, and establishes a time line for completing the various specified tasks they include. To make these determinations, she does not have guidelines to follow. Instead, "it's what came together in time for me to start my literature circle." She envisions "little pockets of students just talking about literature and life and whatever. To me, that's the joy of it." This "discussion time" became her main goal. For her students, most often they engaged in "whatever." While she approved the discussion questions to "know that the questions had at least a shot of getting some discussion," the students simply answered them as they did the other assignments linked to this event. While she notes students' interests, she chooses books for convenience (e.g., their availability as book sets or library acquisitions). While she appreciates a girl "a little bit willing to put herself out there and a little bit willing to say something that might offend someone," she neither fosters nor models these attributes. Sara holds good intentions. Students act on them based on their tangled and varied agendas. In the end, the results drift from Sara's hopes and lessen the possibilities for girls to blend their boldness outside of school with their approach to in-school literacy events such as literature discussion groups.

Kayla Harper: Alpha woman. In many ways, Kayla personifies the new alpha girl: smart, confident, athletic, and an acknowledged leader in her middle school. Kayla takes on the administrative leadership role when her principal is out of the building, and her room is an unofficial meeting place during lunch for a dozen or so teachers. Forty-ish with streaked dirty blond hair and with a long distance runner's physique, she dresses fashionably and coaches the high school girls' track team. Kayla was hired as the eighth grade English/Social Studies block teacher seven years ago and teaches both honors and general track sections of this integrated course. Kayla explained that she was a history major with an English minor but that her history focus was on civil rights in America. Her educational intellectual interest is in how socio-economic class plays out in schools. She is currently taking courses to receive her certificate in school administration and expresses an ongoing interest in issues of equity, particularly as they relate to social class, race, and gender.

This interest in equity issues is found in her book selections. In discussing her selections, she details the thought process that she addresses. First, she does not want to be redundant with what students read at the high school nor with the style and content of the books. Because her students read *Animal Farm* currently, she could not justify including *Watership Down* because it was another book with talking animals. Generally, she uses the books to complement and extend her social studies concepts. For example, *Our Only May Amelia* presents a coming of age story of a young white girl in the Northwest whose life is circumscribed by her gender. Another example, *Nisei Daughter,* explores the life of a Japanese adolescent whose Seattle family is forced to live in Japanese relocation camps during World War II when anti-Japanese sentiment is rampant.

Kayla claims that she uses a literature circle discussion approach, although our field notes revealed little evidence of the traditional concept of literature circles. Kayla had her students work in small groups, but the tasks vary and typically involve some kind of creative project. Since the tasks involve coming "to consensus on some of the concrete items like main characters, plot, conflict, all of those things," Kayla frames them as literature discussion groups.

She characterizes girls in her eighth grade classrooms as those who are "seriously thinking about dates and dances and boys" to those "who are already gearing toward taking the SAT and scholarships and progressing in academics and careers and jobs." She says that girls, as compared to boys, generally are "passionate about a cause. I find more girls interested in the environment or animal rights." Further, she notes that girls at this middle school dominate the school leadership positions, which is a nationwide trend. She worries about girls who "uh, heavy makeup coming on, lots of more provocative clothing and … that's the split. When that happens, boy, it's hard to reclaim. Because all of their value is on how they are seen by others and not on what they think about themselves."

Interestingly enough, Kayla's pedagogical practices do not necessarily exemplify her alpha girl beliefs. Although her curriculum, including her reading selections, certainly focuses on issues of equity, her own daily classroom practices exemplified a traditional, teacher-centered approach. As our field notes revealed and students' comments asserted, Kayla talked about her family and her own life an inordinate amount of time and engaged in discussions that wandered far from curricular topics. One Honors student noted that if your mind wandered during class discussions, you would have no idea how the topic jumped into the new realm. Another Honors student asked aloud during the showing of a clip from the classic movie *Funny Girl* what this movie had to do with their study of the Beat Poets, and was not offered an explanation. Usually, Honors students were much more critical of these kinds of practices than the general track students who saw Kayla as a personable teacher who made the learning of English more enjoyable.

Teachers Mentoring Girls

As the previous vignettes indicate, these teachers differ in their design of their language arts classrooms. Sara directs her classroom without making herself its leading character. In this more off-to-the-side role, students have the unrealized opportunity to play with putting their ideas forward, contribute to the direction of a large or small group discussion, and contend with comments that challenge or contradict their ideas. In a way, the constraints that Sara imposes also afford safeguards. She expects students to be civil and respectful. She encourages the quiet students and is willing to muffle the more boisterous and demanding.

In contrast, Kayla is always at the center of her classroom, regaling students with personal anecdotes and leading the discussion to topics that she believes are always of worth, issues of equity and social justice. While this focus certainly warrants continual exploration, Kayla does not allow its exploration. Instead, she constructs a curriculum and pedagogy where she remains the focal point and her views are the ones that take center stage. As previously asserted, Kayla presents herself as an older version of an alpha girl—a leader, an athlete and coach, and an intellectual. Like Kat, she thrives on attention, and uses her role as teacher to claim it.

Neither teacher truly takes on the attributes so central to literature discussion groups that could further girls' (and their male classmates') opportunities to combine deep thinking with their personal lives and experiences. The chances for choice go away and the opportunities to flex independence in the direction of their learning opportunities remain minimal. These decisions, in turn, diminish these teachers' influence on the burgeoning robustness of girls' out of school lives. As Wexler (1992) noted, the work of adolescence is about "becoming somebody" and that work becomes more complicated in classrooms that do not support ways to create a wholeness that allows girlishness, intellectual boldness, and a unified presentation of the many facets of their lives.

While not all alpha girls, the girls' profiles evidence bits and pieces of them. The academic possibilities afforded by true literature discussions or book club formats offer the chance to lead the way in supporting the new directions of these girls' lives. In these classrooms, that possibility remains suppressed.

Discussion and Educational Significance

Young women, often deemed to be alpha girls and can-do girls, are being framed as the face of the future. Yet, Brumberg (2002) captures an underlying tension: "Despite the important and satisfying gains women have made in achieving greater access to education, power, and all forms of self-expression, including sexual, we have a sense of disquiet about what has happened to our girls." (p. 5). We unveil some explanations for this disquiet.

Some of this disquiet stems from the entanglement of these girls' definitions of themselves and the girls they become in a classroom setting. Girls, like Raylene, with heady proclivities are reduced to participation in simple-minded conversations. Others, like most of the girls in this study, desire to read but lack school and personal time to do much of it. Others, who verge on becoming true readers, are assigned texts that too often dampen rather than increase their enthusiasm to read.

The teachers' actions also contribute to a sense of disquiet. For the teachers in this investigation, their professed interest and use of events like literature discussion groups or book clubs do not materialize. In teachers like Sara, we see a variation that lessens the promise of rich interactions with text and reduces students' chances for finding pleasure in reading. For Kayla and too many others, they simply lose sight of what they say they do in favor of what appears to be a more personal agenda.

We did not intend to propose paths for teachers or the girls in their classrooms to follow. Instead, we framed each research question as a quest for meaning about girls and their participation in literature discussion groups. We do believe that the findings from this research point to the challenges that remain in framing classroom events such as literature discussion groups in ways that increase rather than dampen girls' growth as women and readers. We also believe that girls' lives are more complicated and nuanced than an alpha girl existence.

In the classic movie, *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, Sundance chides Butch to "just keep thinking." We commiserate with Butch's response that he has vision while others wear bifocals. We, like others, hold a vision of the possibility where schools and their teachers nurture girls' new sense of themselves in ways that promote independence, savvy, and the joy of reading. Like Freire (2004), we wait "patiently impatiently" (p. xxix). We look forward to replacing our disquiet with "quietism" (p. 8). To that end, we hope that our initial foray into these two worlds of girls and reading encourages others with, again in the words of Freire, "dreams toward whose realization we struggle" (p. 7). We envision a future where girls are nurtured in school and in their communities to find their own path. Rather than strive to be somebody else's shadow, these girls would hold the possibility to become more than those girls whom Kindlon (2006) touts—not just girls who embody the laudable features typically framed and acquired by gender membership, but who also read voraciously and well along the way.

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Appendix A

Interview Protocol for Student Participants

An introduction

I am interested in learning from you about how you describe yourself as a young woman in middle school and as a reader. I'm particularly interested in hearing you talk about your participation in your class's discussions about the books you read. In fact, sometimes I may ask about specific events that I have observed. While I will share your comments with my research team member, I am the only one who will know that the comments came from you. Then, so I can concentrate on what you're saying, I would like your permission to tape record our conversation. Is that OK with you?

Exploring adolescent girl and reader identity

Tell me about yourself.
(Clarify as necessary: Just tell me who you are. If you were describing yourself, what would you say? Use prompts to tease out in and outside of school personas that include group membership and affiliation.)

Do you consider yourself to be a nice girl? What does that mean to you and other girls in this school?

Tell me about yourself as a reader.

How does the description of yourself as a person fit into how you describe yourself as a reader?

Exploring the relationship of adolescent girl, reader identity, and literature discussion group behaviors

Before talking with you about the literature discussions, tell me about the books you use.
(Probes: titles, selection process)

How would you describe your participation in your language arts class when you talk about books?

During our first interview, you told me about yourself. Is that what you're like during this time?

Think of people whose participation during discussions you admire. What are they like? What do they do during these discussions that makes you admire them? (Tease out gendered qualities using probing questions.)

Think of people whose participation during book discussions you don't admire. What are they like? What specific things do they do?

What do you do during book discussions that you like about yourself? Of those things, which do you like best?

What does your teacher do during literature discussion groups. What do you like and don't like about what she does?

If you were to design a book discussion, what would it be like? Who would be members? What would you read?

Sometimes my friends and I chat about books over the phone or using e-mail. Do you ever do that? Have you thought about it? Do you think it would work?

Is there anything else you would like me to know about you as a participant in a book discussion that my previous questions didn't cover?

Appendix B

Interview Protocol for Teachers

An Introduction
(Remind the teacher that his or her identity will remain anonymous. Receive his or her permission to audiotape.) "In this interview, I want to better understand your views of girls' behaviors during your book discussions. I have a few prepared questions to initially guide our conversations."
(For each question use probes as appropriate to follow their lead and deepen their responses.)

Tell me about the girls in your class.

How do you see these girls as readers?

Tell me about the nice girls in your class.

Do they exhibit differences as readers?

Before talking with you about the literature discussions, tell me about the books you use.
(Probes: titles, selection process)

Tell me about your typical literature discussion groups. How do you describe your role?

What roles do the girls play during the discussion groups?

Do these differ from the boys' roles?

Do you see differences based on peer group affiliation?

How would you describe the ideal literature discussion group?

How would you describe the ideal girl's participation during this discussion?

How would you describe the girl who falls short of this ideal?

Is there anything that these questions didn't cover that you want me to understand about your class's literature discussions and your female students' participation in them?

What challenges and excites you as a teacher during the literature discussion groups?

As I've observed, I've wondered about a few things. (Insert questions driven by the observations that link to girls' behaviors or the teacher's responses.)

What are the most important things you want me to know about your literature discussion groups and your girls' participation in them?

Appendix C

Observation Codes

Teacher

Task explanation of teacher
TET8H TET8G
TET6C1 TET6C2

Teacher formal talk
(due dates, behavior, expectations
TFT 8H TFT8G
TFT6C1 TFT6C2

Teacher gender talk
TGT8H TGT8G
TGT6C1 TGT6C2

Teacher race talk
TRT8H TRT8G
TRT6C1 TRT6C2

Teacher humor
TH8H TH8G
TH6C1 TH6C2

Teacher tracking talk
TTT8H TTT8G
TTT6C1 TTT6C2

Teacher evaluation
TE8H TE8G
TE6C1 TE6C2

Teacher question
TQ8H TQ8G
TQ6C1 TQ6C2

Teacher task behaviors (an act)
TTB8H TTB8G
TTB6C1 TTB6C2

Teacher social behaviors
(e.g., call from husband)
TSB8H TSB8G
TSB6C1 TSB6C2

Teacher conversation linked to school tasks
TCS8H TCS8G
TCS6C1 TCS6C2

Teacher conversation not linked to school tasks
TCSN8H TCSN8G
TCSN6C1 TCSN6C2

Student (add male or female)

Student task explanation
STE(M/F)8H
STE(M/F)8G
STE(M/F)6C1
STE(M/F)6C2

Student social behaviors
SSB(M/F)8H
SSB(M/F)8G
SSB(M/F)6C1
SSB(M/F)6C2

Student identity presenters
(appearance descriptors)
SIP(M/F)8H
SIP(M/F)8G
SIP(M/F)6C1
SIP(M/F)6C2

Student response
(an action)
SR(M/F)8H
SR(M/F)8G
SR(M/F)6C1
SR(M/F)6C2

Student task behaviors
STB(M/F)8H
STB(M/F)8G
STB(M/F)6C1
STB(M/F)6C2

Student off task behaviors
SOTB(M/F)8H
SOTB(M/F)8G
SOTB(M/F)6C1
SOTB(M/F)6C2

Student questions
SQ(M/F)8H
SQ(M/F)8G
SQ(M/F)6C1
SQ(M/F)6C2

Student answer
(a response to a question)
SA(M/F)8H SA(M/F)8G
SA(M/F)6C1 SA(M/F)6C2

Student conversation linked to school tasks but conversational
SCS(M/F)8H
SCS(M/F)8G
SCS(M/F)6C1
SCS(M/F)6C2

Student conversation not linked to school tasks
SCSN(M/F)8H
SCSN(M/F)8G
SCSN(M/F)6C1
SCSN(M/F)6C2

Student humor
SH(M/F)8H
SH(M/F)8G
SH(M/F)6C1
SH(M/F)6C2

Student reading
SR(M/F)8H
SR(M/F)8G
SR(M/F)6C1
SR(M/F)6C2

Student gender talk
(gender is mentioned or the topic links to gender)
SGT(M/F)8H
SGT(M/F)8G
SGT(M/F)6C1
SGT(M/F)6C2

Student reading (not part of curriculum)
SRN(M/F)8H
SRN(M/F)8G
SRN(M/F)6C1
SRN(M/F)6C2

Group task conversation
GTC(M/F)8H
GTC(M/F)8G
GTC(M/F)6C1
GTC(M/F)6C2

Events

Night of the Notables
(Grade 8 only)
NN8H
NN8G

Literature discussion group (Grade 6 only)
LDG6C1
LDG6C2

Television watching
TV8H
TV8G
TV6C1
TV6C2

Book discussion group with the whole class
BDWC8H
BDWC8G
BDWC6C1
BDWC6C2

Question response segment
QR8H
QR8G
QR6C1
QR6C2

Note: The letters provide shorthand for the longer code while the numbers denote a grade level and section. For example QR8H refers to the question response segment code for the eighth grade honors section while TV6C2 refers to television watching for the first grade 6 section.

Appendix D

Interview Codes

Identity: Age, grade, adjectives
ID8H ID8G
ID6C1 ID6C2

Identity: Things I do
IA8H IA8G
IA6

Identity: Friendship groups
IFG8H IFG8G
IFG6C1 IFG6C2

Nice: Definition, identification with
NICE8H NICE8G
NICE6C1 NICE6C2

Ideal girl
IDEAL8H IDEAL8G
IDEAL6C1 IDEAL6C2

Personal reading: Identify (a reader or not)
PRI8H PRI8G
PRI6C1 PRI6C2

Personal reading: Genre and examples (genre and/or titles)
PRG8H PRG8G
PR6C1 PR6C2

Personal reading: Influences (personal reading recommendations)
PRIF8H PRIF8G
PRIF6C1 PRIF6C2

Personal reading: Reading practices (when, conditions, outside and inside choices, summer reading, chat with friends)
PRP8H PRP8G
PRP6C1 PRP6C2

Personal reading: Gender issues (girl/reader connections)
PRGE8H PRGE8G
PRGE6C1 PRGE6C2

School reading (assigned texts): Comments across books, preferences about how they are expected to read them
SRG8H SRG8G
SRG6C1 SRG6C2

School reading: Comments about a book or combination of books
SRS8H SRS8G
SRS6C1 SRS6C2

Class participation: How they describe their participation
CPP8H CPP8G
CPP6C1 CPP6C2

Class participation: People they admire and reasons
CPA8H CPA8G
CPA6C1 CPA6C2

Class participation: People they don't admire
CPD8H CPD8G
CPD6C1 CPD6C2

Class participation: Teacher comments—positive
CPTA8H CPTA8G
CPTA6C1 CPTA6C2

Class participation: Teacher comments—negative
CPTNA8H CPTNA8G
CPTNA6C1 CPTNA6C2

Kid designed book curriculum: What they would do if they were in charge
KDBC8H KDBC8G
KDBC6C1 KDBC6C2

Note: The letters provide shorthand for the longer code while the numbers denote a grade level and section. For example PRG8H refers to personal reading references for the eighth grade honors section while PR6C1 refers to personal reading references in the first section of grade 6.