

“The Boys Won’t Let Us Play:” Fifth-Grade Mestizas Challenge Physical Activity Discourse at School

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Drawing on feminist, critical, and poststructural theories, the purpose of this research was: (a) to understand fifth-grade mestizas self-identified barriers to physical activity, and (b) to work with them to develop strategies for challenging these barriers. Data were collected over the 2005–06 school year. Our interpretations are divided into three sections: (a) the barriers the girls identified to their physical activity participation; (b) how we worked with them to study their primary self-identified barrier to physical activity—“the boy’s won’t let us play;” and (c) how we refocused our research to help the girls publicize their barrier to challenge the inequities in physical activity at their school.

Key words: activist research, Borderlands, gender, race

As the students reported: “If we don’t stop it in the fifth grade, next year there’s going to be a whole bunch of boys terrorizing all the girls and making them feel bad” (Maggie Mae); “If we don’t end it now...the boys are going to keep doing it” (Maria). “We need more forums within which students’ critiques of current practices and visions for other possibilities are put first” (Cook-Sather, 2002, p. 11).

Over the years, scholars doing quantitative research documented the connections between children’s physical activity and health (e.g., Kientzler, 1999; McDonough & Crocker, 2005). Despite this connection, trends have shown declining physical activity among many children, especially girls and minorities (Gordon-Larsen, Adair, & Popkin, 2001; Kann, Warren, et al., 1996; Lindquist, Reynolds, & Goran, 1999; Wolf et al., 1993). For example, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [USDHHS; 2000] reported that girls are less active than boys,

and significant documentation has attested to the high rates of obesity, physical inactivity, and type 2 diabetes in Hispanic children and youth (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2001; USDHHS, 2000). According to the CDC, Hispanic children have the highest rates of obesity, are significantly (25.9%) less likely to participate in organized physical activity, and significantly less likely (11.2%) to report no moderate-to-vigorous physical activity compared to their White counterparts ((8.2% and 46.6%, respectively; CDC, 2001).

Given the decline in girls’ and minority children’s physical activity, scholars suggested ways of designing interventions that better meet activity needs (McKenzie, et al., 2002; McKenzie, et al., 1997; Trost, et al., 2002). For example, Harrison and colleagues (2002) claimed physical activity and preventative programs needed to be more culturally relevant. Kientzler (1999) suggested we need to listen to girls, learn more about their perspectives on physical activity, and be careful that we do not rely solely on researchers’ suggestions to design interventions for inactive girls. Wilson, Williams, Evans, Mixon, and Rheaume (2005) suggested providing girls with choices and making them part of any intervention design process.

Despite these intervention suggestions, Azzarito and Solmon (2006) pointed out a critical gap in our understanding that will ultimately prevent physical activity interventions from meeting their full potential. They claimed that researchers have failed to sufficiently address how

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gender and race influence individuals' embodiment and how this failure related to young people's physical activity participation. To better meet minority girls' physical activity needs, we need to look at how intersections of race and gender relate to physical activity opportunities and participation.

Race, Gender, and Embodiment

Scholars doing feminist, critical, and poststructural research have begun to better understand how race and gender influence girls' embodiments and their activity participation (Azzarito & Solmon, 2006; Hamzeh, 2007; Oliver & Lalik, 2000, 2004a). For example, Duncan and Robinson (2004) found that African American young women and girls are often socialized out of physical activity at early ages. Their participants reported physical activity "...is a guys' thing...African American males play basketball, they become athletes. African American women do not become athletes.... It is more socially acceptable to 'get with the basketball player' than to actually be the basketball player" (pp. 92–93). Oliver and Lalik (2000, 2004a) found that race and gender were critical to how Black girls learned to feel about their bodies and the bodies of others. The girls in their research viewed attracting attention as critical to how they viewed their bodies and claimed that Black girls believed light skin was considered more favorable than dark skin and contributed to whether Black girls could attract boys' attention. Azzarito and Solmon (2005) reported that Blacks (boys more than girls) believed muscularity, skill, power, appearance, size, and academics were important to their physical education participation more so than Whites. In her work with Muslim girls, Hamzeh (2007) found their physical activity participation was often limited, not because the girls lacked interest but rather because of how gender and religion/race regulated girls' dress and public presence with boys.

While this research resonates with scholars of color who reminded us that the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and social class are central to girls' experiences (Anzaldúa, 2007; Cruz, 2006; Delgado Bernal, Elenes, Gondinez, & Villenas, 2006), Mohanty (2003) and Ahmed (2000) cautioned of the importance of moving away from essentializing minorities and treating them as if they were "a singular group" (Ahmed, 2000, p. 165). Rather, they suggested a need to study race and gender in ways that did not view minorities as the "strange other" (Ahmed, 2000), but rather as people with whom we can engage in meaningful conversations about their daily lives.

Within these conversations we might begin to better understand how girls negotiate normative discourses that circulate in their lives and influence their physical activity participation and opportunities (Hall, 1996). By focusing on girls' physical activity experiences in ways that highlight race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, age and so forth, we

might be in a better position to attend to "how Latinas are engaged in a process of resisting subjectivities that seek to classify them in particularly limited racialized, classed, gendered, and sexualized ways" (Jamieson, 2003, p. 2). Moving beyond limiting racialized and gendered subjectivities is extremely important for researchers who work with girls living on the Borderlands (Anzaldúa, 2007). Anzaldúa described these girls as *mestizas* who are:

...cradled in one culture, sandwiched between two cultures, straddling all three cultures and their value system, *la mestiza* undergoes a struggle of flesh, a struggle of borders, an inner war. Like all people, we perceive the version of reality that our culture communicates. Like others having or living in more than one culture, we get multiple, often opposing messages (p. 100).

La mestiza, according to Anzaldúa (2007) is a "product of the transfer of the cultural and spiritual values of one group to another" (p. 100). Through this transfer, a new *mestiza* consciousness emerges and is considered "a consciousness of the Borderlands" (Anzaldúa, p. 99). Through this Borderland consciousness, *la mestiza* is one who "copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity. She learns to be Indian in a Mexican culture; to be Mexican from an Anglo point of view. She learns to juggle cultures" (Anzaldúa, p. 101). This juggling of conflicting cultures creates tensions that often result in girls resisting one particular label (e.g., Mexican, Indian, Anglo). Thus, this girl lives in a "middle space... a psychic and corporeal space that resists categorization" (Jamieson, 2003, p. 3).

These middle spaces are often unsettling and create possible resistance to discourses that perpetuate oppressive practices or limiting labels. For example, Mexican American girls all too often hear how a Chicana girl's highest virtue is to serve and Mexicans are lazy (Anzaldúa, 2007, p. 71) or that physical activity is for Mexican boys not Mexican girls (Denner & Dunbar, 2004). These middle spaces, when *la mestiza* resists any discourse that categorizes her in a particular way, become important for activist researchers who hope to assist girls in negotiating discourses that limit their physical activity participation and opportunities. However, to recognize the possibilities of these middle spaces in girls' lives, we need to follow the lead of Cook-Sather (2002), who wrote about authorizing student perspectives.

Authorizing Student Perspective

To change oppressive physical activity practices, we must stop seeing researchers as the only experts. Rather, we must see the girls as viable co-researchers and listen

to them and respond to what we hear (Cook-Sather, 2002). In listening to girls talk, it is important to focus not only on “what is” but also on “what might be” (Oliver, Hamzeh, & McCaughy, 2009). In looking at what might be, “...educators must embrace what Welch (1990) calls a ‘feminist ethic of risk’—the willingness to take small steps toward changing oppressive practices even if complete change seems or is unattainable” (Cook-Sather, 2002, p. 6). In other words, as Stanley (1990) asserted, the point of research is to change the world, not only to study it.

To better understand girls’ physical activity barriers and ways to help them challenge their barriers, our research needs to include authentic spaces where girls can contribute to what is studied, how it is studied, and what is done with the information learned. We agree with Cook-Sather (2002), who claimed that students have unique perspectives about what goes on in their worlds and as long as “we exclude these perspectives from our conversations about schooling and how it needs to change, our efforts at reform will be based on an incomplete picture of life in classrooms and schools and how that life could be improved” (p. 3). If we apply her idea to physical activity, we can see the importance of including students’ perspectives in challenging their self-identified barriers to physical activity participation and opportunities (Oliver et al., 2009). By listening to and learning from students’ perspectives, we can begin to understand their experiences from their points of view. Further, we can see how girls resist limiting racialized or gendered ways of being in physical activity (Jamieson, 2003).

To authorize student perspectives we must do more than simply include them in conversations that name and critique the local normative discourses limiting their physical activity participation. Rather, we must create valued spaces where students can speak and researchers retune our ears to hear what they say and redirect our actions in response (Cook-Sather, 2002). In the response, we can collaborate with students to practice strategies for changing inequities as *they* see them. In part, this requires us to hear the multiple and conflicting messages within the middle spaces girls on the Borderland negotiate (Anzaldúa, 2007).

Jennifer Gore (1993) recommended using our power as researchers “in an attempt (that might not be successful) to help others exercise power” (p. 59). To collaborate with students as co-researchers, we agree with Weiler (1988) who claimed it is important to recognize “the limits of what is possible to accomplish...and recognize the value and importance of *doing* what is possible” (p. 153). In this inquiry, we helped girls identify barriers to their physical activity and develop strategies to challenge those barriers. Through this process, we hoped the girls could use these strategies to transform their worlds to increase their physical activity opportunities.

Method

This study was a participatory action research project—“a methodological stance rooted in the belief that valid knowledge is produced only in collaboration and in action” (Fine, 2007, p. 613). From this perspective, researchers position participants as “architects” rather than research “subjects,” who then become co-researchers contributing both to research design and knowledge production. Central to participatory action research is the “fundamental right to ask, investigate, dissent, and demand what could be” (Fine, 2007, p. 613).

Setting and Participants

This paper is part of a larger project in which we worked with three groups of fifth-grade girls in a rural border community in the southwestern U.S. (Oliver et al., 2009). The director of instruction for the local school district selected schools with the greatest diversity with regard to student ethnicity and social class. Prior to this project, we discussed with the physical education teacher and principal our interest in working with girls who did not seem to be as physically active as other children. By having the teacher select participants for this study, we believed we might learn more about ways to work with girls others saw as “inactive.”

This project took place at Frida Kahlo Elementary; the oldest school in the district with a predominantly Mexican American student population from economically disadvantaged families. Established in 1948, the school is known locally as the “bilingual school” and is located in the oldest and poorest part of the city. At the time of the study, there were approximately 366 students—94.3% Hispanic, 2.6% Caucasian, and 2.6% African American. Ninety-six percent of the student population was economically disadvantaged, 33% were English language learners, and the student-teacher ratio was 13–1.

We focused on one group of fifth-grade girls. The physical education teacher selected four of the girls—Kathy, Mary, Marie, and Maria—and we invited the fifth, Maggie Mae, to join the group after the first week, because the other girls believed she would be an asset to the project. We obtained informed consent from the girls and their parents.

Mary was 10 years old at the time of the study. She identified herself as Mexican American and bi-lingual, with English as her first language. She lived with her mother, father, and older brother. She enjoyed riding her bike, visiting her grandma, and playing with her cat.

Marie was also 10 years old at the time of the study. She identified herself as Mexican

American. She lived with her mother, father, and younger sister. She enjoyed spending time talking with her friends, doing karate, and playing basketball.

Maria was 10 years old at the time of the study. She identified herself as Mexican American, living with her mother, father, and five brothers. Her favorite thing to do was to play basketball, because it helped her to be active. She did not enjoy participating in sports in which there was a chance of being hit with a ball.

Maggie Mae also 10 years old at the time of the study. She identified herself as Black and Indian, living with her mother, father, grandma, brother, and sister. Her favorite thing to do was play basketball and sports, because she “likes to be active.” In addition to physical activity, she enjoyed spending time with her family and friends.

Kathy was 10 years old at the time of the study. She identified herself as Mexican American and bilingual. She lived with her grandma and her two brothers, because her mother worked 3 hours from her home. She enjoyed reading scary stories.

While the five girls were insiders in this study, both Kim and Manal were outsiders (Anzaldúa, 2007; Collins, 1991). At the time of the study, Kim was 38 years old. She identified herself as White, middle class, heterosexual, physically active, and able-bodied. Manal was 43 years old. She identified herself as a cross-class, Arab Muslim woman, homosexual, physically active, able-bodied woman.

Data Collection

Prior to data collection, in spring 2005, we conducted a 6-month pilot study to learn how to communicate with predominantly Mexican American and Hispanic fifth-grade students about their physical activity participation patterns. What we learned was similar to our work with other young people (e.g., that it was insufficient to simply interview them to understand their worlds; Oliver, 1999; Oliver & Lalik, 2000). Thus, drawing on previous work (e.g., Oliver & Lalik, 2004), we developed strategies to work with the girls as co-researchers and help them challenge the physical activity barriers they identified. We collected data over the 2005–06 school year and worked with the girls an average 3–4 days (Fridays) per month between September and May for approximately 60 min each day. We met with the girls during regular class time, because the principal and the classroom teachers believed the project was important. Meetings took place in various spaces, including an empty classroom, the library, or the playground.

With Kim and Manal’s help, the girls pursued several activities, which included: (a) developing personal biographies, (b) taking photos of things that helped the girls be physically active and things that prevented them from being physically active, (c) conducting individual and group analyses of the photographs to identify major themes that influenced their activity participation, and (d) conducting an inquiry to understand the girls’ primary self-identified barrier to physical activity—“the boys won’t let us play”—and assisting in publicizing the findings at school.

We drew on our knowledge of working with young people to develop tasks for this research project (Lalik & Oliver, 2007; Oliver & Lalik, 2004b). For the first part of the study, we identified what we wanted to learn, planned the tasks in ways we thought the girls would find enjoyable, and talked about being responsive to what the girls shared (Oliver & Lalik, 2004b). For the remainder of the study, in which the girls acted as co-researchers, we planned sessions based on what they wanted to happen. To remain responsive to their perspectives (Cook-Sather, 2002), we planned only 1 day at a time, enacted our plan, and reflected on what happened. Each work session followed a similar pattern.

For example, immediately following each session, Kim and Manal talked about and audiotaped their initial impressions. They discussed things they found confusing or interesting, questions, things they seemed to pay particular attention to, etc. In addition, each wrote field notes to document the sessions. A graduate assistant transcribed the audiorecorded sessions. We read the transcriptions separately and made notes of things we wanted to pursue further as well as what the girls wanted to pursue.

Using our annotated transcriptions, field notes, and any artifacts the girls created, we held planning meetings to design the next work session and create tasks based on our initial analyses. We consistently looked for ways to support the girls in naming their physical activity barriers and help them challenge the inequities they identified. Our debriefing and planning often led us back to the girls for additional information. That is, Kim asked the girls to further explain or elaborate on previous discussions or to critique what she or they were saying and doing. This continual revisiting of ideas helped us analyze what occurred as the year progressed. It also helped us to interpret and reinterpret events in response to Lather’s (1991) challenge for creating more systematic efforts to establish data trustworthiness. That is, to “check the credibility of our data and minimize the distorting effect of personal bias upon the logic of evidence” (Lather, 1991, p. 65).

Data Sources and Analysis

In triangulating our data (Lather, 1986), we collected multiple sources, including: (a) 15 transcribed audiorecordings of our work sessions, (b) field notes Kim and

Manal took after their work sessions, (c) notes Kim took during planning meetings, (d) task sheets created for the sessions, (e) notes Kim took from conversations with the physical education teachers, classroom teachers, and school principals, (f) artifacts created by the girls and Kim, (g) photos the girls took, and (h) individual and group analyses of the photographs. Bogdan and Biklen (1998) and Hutchinson (1990) suggested general guidelines for organizing research data. Following their suggestions, we organized the data chronologically, paginating it, copying it, and filing it by session date. We made notations in the margins about insights generated during this phase. In all, we analyzed 15 audiotapes, 325 pages of transcriptions, 35 pages of debriefing and field notes, 79 pages of student generated artifacts, and 63 photographs. We reviewed our individual analyses to determine activity barriers the girls identified and develop strategies to help them challenge those barriers. This analysis was a basis for writing a narrative of the project (Oliver, 1998).

Interpretations

Photo Analysis and Critique

We agree with Sanders-Bustle (2003) that providing students with cameras and asking them to photograph their worlds created opportunities for them to document their life experiences that might otherwise go unnoticed. Thus, we asked the girls to “photograph things that helped them to be physically active and things that prevented them from being physically active.” Further, using images to begin a conversation also helps young people explain verbally what they know intuitively (Oliver & Lalik, 2004a, 2004b; Sanders-Bustle, 2003). Several of the girls’ photos

were of different spaces around the school playground, such as the basketball courts, swings, jungle gym, and tree borders serving as benches for the children. Images of the girls’ home lives included pictures of computers, girls doing housework, and playing in their backyards. Kim asked the girls to explain their pictures, and they began by identifying some of the physical activity barriers that originated at home.

Kathy: This is a picture of my TV.

Kim: Your TV? Okay.

Kathy: It doesn’t help to be active, because the only thing you do is sit down and see TV.

Mary: Sometimes the parents let us watch it [TV] for hours.

Maria: [Picking up a picture of a vacuum] I don’t watch it. I have to clean at home.

Kathy: And this picture my grandma took of me at my computer doing my homework... and this is me doing my chores.

After defining barriers to their physical activity at home, Mary explained a photograph she took of Maggie Mae standing alongside the school basketball courts during recess watching the boys play (see Figure 1), “This one...I took [of] a girl [Maggie Mae] that some boys don’t want to play with them.” She explained that the boys told Maggie Mae she could not play with them because “she was too big and too tall...that she made most of the goals and that made the girls beat the boys...and because her skin was the wrong color.”

Mary’s photo stimulated a critique about physical activity at their school, during which the girls used several photographs to explain how the boys and girls interacted



Figure 1. Maggie Mae during recess.

during recess—their primary opportunity for physical activity. Mary picked up a picture of one of her friends, “That is my friend, but the boys won’t let her swing, because they say it’s the boys’ swings” (see Figure 2). Marie jumped in with one of her pictures of the boys swinging and a girl standing on the side, “Here are the boys and they told that girl she couldn’t get on [the swing] because girls don’t know how to go fast.” Kim responded, “What do you think about that?” Marie continued, “It’s crazy.” Mary continued Marie’s critique of the boys, “This one is of me that someone took.”

Kim: Why did you have someone take that picture?

Mary: “Cause they [the boys] won’t let me play soccer with them...cause they say I wasn’t good enough, and plus I have glasses.

Kim: Did you know that a lot of people play soccer and wear glasses?

Mary: Yah, because once I got hit; they [the boys] say I can break them [my glasses], but I said that I’ll be careful but they said no you can’t play.

Kim: Does this happen a lot at your school that the boys tell the girls what they can and can’t do?

Girls together: Yes!

Kim: Do you think it’s fair that the boys are allowed to do that?

Girls together: No!

Mary: I say that any girl can do whatever they want, because sports can be for both boys and girls.... I tell them like we should be friends and don’t make fun of people, what kind of color of skin they have.

The original group of four girls identified their primary barrier to physical activity at school was, “...the boy’s won’t let us play.” Because Maggie Mae was a central part of their photo analysis and conversations about the boys, we decided to invite her to participate with our group. Two weeks later, she joined the group, and Kim explained what they were doing.

Kim: We’re going to get you caught up...let me remind you about some of the things you said last time. Mary, you had said that sometimes boys won’t let the girls play...and Marie, you said that sometimes the boys won’t let the girls play because they have the wrong color of skin and they had taken a picture of you [Maggie Mae]. Did that happen to you? Did the boys tell you that you couldn’t play because you had the wrong color of skin?

Maggie Mae: Yeah...they told me I couldn’t play because I was a girl and I was Black.... Sometimes I know that at the fifth-grade recess, some boys don’t want the girls to play because they are girls, and I think that’s really a problem because we should all be able to do what we want to do; we should be able to play what we want to play.

Kim: What did you do when they said that to you? Or how did that make you feel?

Maggie Mae: It made me feel bad, and I just went to the monkey bars.... When I went inside I told my teacher and Maria.

Through the girls’ photo analysis and the conversation with Maggie Mae, we began to identify the different



Figure 2. Girl watching.

messages the girls were negotiating about physical activity, such as being told by boys that certain spaces on the playground were for boys only, being excluded from playing simply because they were girls or perceived as being either better or worse, depending on the situation, and being told by boys that their skin was the wrong color. The messages received from the boys conflicted with the girls' ideas about physical activity. That is, as the girls identified what the boys were saying and doing, they began to articulate clearly their resistance to the categorization that limited their physical activity participation (e.g., Mary saying that sports were for both girls and boys and that a girl's skill or skin color should have no relevance in whether she can play sport, or Maggie Mae saying that she and other girls should be able to play anything they wanted to and being a girl should not restrict their options). These conversations helped us to see the middle spaces and gave us an opportunity to nurture the girls' resistance to the boys' physical activity discourse at school.

Girls as Co-Researchers

After Maggie Mae joined the group, she agreed with the others that the boys were limiting activity opportunities and elaborated on how and why they prevented girls from participating in physical activity and what she thought of their behavior. She claimed:

Quite often the boys want to put you down and make you feel like you're a girly girl, which we are not because I can be anything I choose to be. Like if it's a dance, for that day, I'm not playing no sport, I'm gonna be in a dress...looking at the mirror every five minutes. But on days where it's not gonna be like that, I'm gonna be outside playing sports. I can be different things on different days.

Heeding Cook-Sather's (2002) advice on authorizing student perspectives, we asked the girls to join us as co-researchers to better understand why the boys wouldn't let them. Kim said to the girls, "So let me ask you this...we have boys that really are trying to tell a lot of girls that you can't play.... Do you want to do anything about that? If you could do something about it would you?" Immediately Maggie Mae said:

Yes, definitely, because I don't think that's right. I think everyone should have equal rights...because in the constitution it says everyone should have equal rights, and the boys think, oh, what they're better, and it's not only at recess it's in everyday things at all times.

The other girls agreed with Maggie Mae that as a group we should do something about it. Maggie Mae said we needed to "protest" and suggested we "create a video" documenting what the boys did during recess to keep the girls from playing; she volunteered to be the "film director."

We agree with Atweh and Burton (1995) that "participating with students as co-researchers is an expression of trust and respect for their ability to find out creative solutions to their current life problems as well as an opportunity for them to nurture this ability" (p. 654). Thus, we consulted the school principal for permission to video record the children to create a documentary. We learned this was not allowed, so Maggie Mae suggested that "We create a PowerPoint presentation...and have assemblies in the cafeteria." She went on to say:

We could ask Mr. Martinez, the computer teacher, if he can bring his smart board in there and show it on there as a presentation, and we, like, can record the boys at recess and how they treat girls...and then we can show it to everyone so they can see what they are doing.

Maggie Mae's idea set in motion the remainder of our research project. While the original four girls had identified the boys as being a major barrier to their physical activity participation at school, Maggie Mae jumped in and guided the group with her ideas. The other girls enthusiastically supported and followed her lead. We worked with the girls to devise ways to study the barrier they identified, so we could make a presentation to their teachers, peers, and school principal. Maggie Mae started off with:

We can bring all the fifth-grade girls in and interview them and ask them how they feel when the boys say different things to them. I believe it will help, because it's not very fair for us girls and it doesn't feel very nice at all, because I know for myself that I do not appreciate it at all, and its just a whole lot of chaos going around everyday and you see different things happening to girls.

Kim suggested, "Think about things you want to ask other girls and you might start going and asking other girls if they experience some of this...and next week we will start with a plan of how we are going to do this." When the group met the following week, the girls had decided they wanted to know more about the boys not letting them play. Drawing from Maggie Mae's idea of interviewing all fifth-grade girls, Kim suggested the girls create questions based on the information they hoped to gather. The group agreed and came up with questions they planned to ask informally of other fifth-grade girls and boys at their

school, such as: "When the boys won't let you play, how do you feel about that?" "What excuses do the boys make to tell you that you can't play?" "How would you feel if we treated you this way?"

Once the girls developed their questions, Kim had them practice interviewing each other (Oliver & Lalik, 2004a) and taking notes. During their practice, they began to critique how the boys used gender stereotypes to push the girls out of physical activity.

Mary: How do you feel when the boys don't let you play?

Marie: I feel really bad, because, like, just that they're boys and that doesn't make us different from each other.

Mary: Um, do boys let you play with them or don't they?

Marie: NO, boys don't let some of the girls play with them. They don't let the girls that I hang out with play with them. They say that all we do is paint our nails. They tell every single girl, "How come you guys don't just go do your girly-girl stuff or put on make-up?"

Over the next 2 weeks the girls informally interviewed their peers before school, during recess, and after school and documented their learning in journals. They reported on what they learned with respect to their question, "Do the boys let you play during recess?"

Kim: What did you learn from your interviews?

Marie: I learned that some boys were teasing girls and that they called them names and won't let them play.

Maggie Mae: There was one girl in our class named Pearl, and she almost started crying when I was interviewing her, because she said the boys really make fun of her and they called her dumb for thinking that she can play...and she thinks that the boys are destruction. And I think it'd be a good idea if girls and boys had separated schools in elementary.

Kathy: I learned that boys were making a lot of fun of girls.

Marie: I learned that some boys don't let you play 'cause you're not a boy and that girls are girly girls.

Maggie Mae: The boys also say that we are dumb, stupid, and wouldn't last five seconds...and that you're a woman and you need to stay in your place.

Kim: Ohhh? Did anyone ask the question, "What do you do when the boys say you can't play?"

Maggie Mae: Yes. I learned that some girls just hold in their anger... And I told them that it's really bad to hold in your anger cause it's gonna mess with your head.

Kathy: I learned that some girls just left and played with somebody else.

Based on their informal interviews, the girls decided to engage in a more thorough investigation (i.e., to "interview all fifth grade girls and boys" regarding why "boys don't let girls play"). We saw our role as supporting in their research process; thus, we helped them take questions from their informal interviews and construct a questionnaire as a guide for gathering more specific information. Some questions they designed were: "How do the boys prevent you from playing?" "When the boys do not let you play, how does that make you feel?" and "Why do you think the boys act this way?" Questions for boys included: "Why are boys preventing girls from playing?" "How would you feel if you were in my position, you were different, you were a girl, or you were a different color?" and "Why can't you treat girls the way we treat boys, with respect?"

After finishing the survey, the girls planned how to interview the fifth-grade students. Their intent was to use the information they gathered to put together a presentation on how and why the boys wouldn't let the girls play. Because Kathy could speak Spanish, she offered to interview students whose first language was Spanish. The other girls divided up the remaining students in the "Spanish" and "English" classes and set off to collect their data.

Through this process, the girls learned about how and why boys wouldn't let them play. They reported on "excuses" boys used. For example, Maggie Mae heard that girls were "too weak," "girls will get hurt," "you're a girly girl," "you're too fragile," and that "it's a man's game." Marie learned that the boys would say, "we already have enough players," or "we're better than you." Marie heard the excuses that girls were "too small," "too short," and that "you can't make a goal." Mary was told that "you wouldn't last five seconds," and "you don't know how to catch a ball." Finally, Marie learned that the excuses included, "you're not a boy," and "we're better than you."

The girls also reported on how the boys failed to treat them equally. Mary claimed that, "They treat girls unequally and they don't let them play because they think they are girly girls." Kim asked, "What else did you learn about how the boys treat the girls?"

Maggie Mae: They use a lot of violence...and they try to scare the girls away.

Mary: They also call the girls names.

Maggie Mae: And use inappropriate language.

Kathy: They make fun of girls, like "You're girly girls and can't play."

Maggie Mae summed up the interview process, "What the boys are doing to the girls is a crisis, and it needs to stop before middle school."

Much of what the girls learned through their interviews reflected some of the research on gender discourse in physical activity (Azzarito, Solmon, & Harrison, 2006; Oliver & Lalik, 2004b; Wright, 1995, 1999). As researchers, we could have easily overlooked the girls' concerns, because we are familiar with gender stereotypes and inequitable opportunities for girls in physical activity. However, what we continued to notice were the middle spaces where the girls resisted being labeled by boys in ways that denied their opportunity for physical activity. We continued to see opportunities as researchers to assist and nurture the girls in challenging the limiting racialized and gendered ways of thinking.

Rather than see ourselves as the experts on girls' physical activity reform and intervention, we listened to them in ways that communicated our belief that *they* were the agents in their worlds (Davies, 2000). This required us to look critically at issues of power within the research process. As Cook-Sather (2002) pointed out, "Most power relationships have no place for listening and actively do not tolerate it because it is very inconvenient; to really listen means to have to respond" (p. 8). We continued shift the power in ways the girls could take the lead in finding ways of challenging the boys.

Girls Speak Out Publicly

Kim and Manal worked to help the girls communicate their concerns. Their hope was to find words that might inspire the boys to change their behavior, help teachers understand the "crisis" as they saw it, and get those in power to take action to ensure equitable opportunities for activity participation. During this process, we assisted the girls in selecting the content for their presentation and helped them think about how to word their concerns.

Selecting Content. Kim asked the girls, "What kind of information would you want in your presentation?" The girls were clear about what they thought was important, and all talked quickly about what they should include.

Maggie Mae. The information I would want is, like, "How are they treating you? Why are they treating you like this? When do they treat you like this?" and "How often do they prevent you from playing?"

Maria. Why are you guys doing that to the girls?

Maggie Mae. How does it make you feel?

Kathy. Why do you think they are doing this to you?

Mary. Why can't they treat us equal?

Once the girls decided on the broad topics to include in their presentation, they discussed what they learned from their interview data that centered on these areas. As they recalled their interviews, we helped them form themes to outline their presentation. Working from the outline, the girls put their interview data into the various themes they identified. Through this analysis, they became much clearer on what they wanted to report to others. They structured their presentation to include the following: (a) today's message; (b) what is our concern; (c) what have we done to study our concern; (d) what we learned; and (e) how we want the boys to treat girls.

Choosing Words Carefully. After they decided on the content, we worked with the girls to word their presentation so that the boys and adults (all but one were men) would hear their concerns and, it was hoped, make the changes the girls were asking of them:

Maggie Mae. Our message is, "We want to figure out why the boys are treating the girls so badly and how should they really treat them...during physical activity."

Kim. Is it badly or is it unfairly?

Maggie Mae. Both.

Kim. Remember, you are going to give this presentation to a group of boys. Do you want them to be angry at you or to listen to you?

All together. Listen.

Kim. So if you want them to listen to you, do you want to make them mad right at the beginning or do you want to make them think?

Marie. Make them think.

During this part of the process, the girls' frustrations with the boys' behaviors would surface in their language; they continually wanted to criticize the boys and do it publicly. Kim tried to respect the girls' frustrations while at the same time helping them think about the ramifications of their language and ways to communicate their concerns publicly. In doing so, she inadvertently privileged her specific experiences over the girls' views.

Marie. Why don't we tell Maggie Mae what kind of boys are making fun of us, and we can take a picture...of them, and we can put it in [the presentation].

Maggie Mae. We can't take no pictures of the boys, cuz remember the principal said that.

Kim. Right...I don't think it would be appropriate for us to go take pictures of specific boys doing this. I think that would, it might embarrass some people, and I just don't think that's okay.

Maggie Mae: We can get all the boys then... like one's embarrassed, then all of them get embarrassed.

Kim: But I don't think that our role is to embarrass the boys. That isn't going to help them treat you better.

Maria: Yeah, cuz it will make them get madder at you.

Rather than close off a conversation by focusing only on blaming and criticizing the boys, we tried to use our knowledge about getting people to listen to help the girls use language that might inspire change (Anzaldúa, 2007; Fine, 2007). As Anzaldúa wrote:

It is imperative that *mestizas* support each other in changing the sexist elements in the Mexican Indian culture. As long as woman is put down, the Indian and the Black in all of us is put down.... Men, even more than women, are fettered to gender roles. Women at least have the guts to break out of bondage (p. 106).

Maggie Mae: The first question, "Why can't the boys treat the girls equally?" I want to know.

Kim: What if we start with, "How does it make you feel when the boys won't let you play," so that we start off with how girls feel?... If we start with, "How does it make you feel when the boys won't let you play," that doesn't attack the boys. It just tells people how you feel.

Up to this point in the project, Kim had followed the girls' ideas, leads, and suggestions. But when they showed a desire to criticize and embarrass the boys to elicit behavior change, Kim discouraged their ideas and suggested they follow hers. It is reasonable for activist researchers to share their knowledge (Fine, 2007) if that knowledge can help participants challenge inequities; however, at the time Kim was not hearing the girls' forms of cultural knowledge (Anzaldúa, 2007; Collins, 1998). In fact, what she was doing could be described by Anzaldúa (2007) as pushing the girls to be Mexican [or Black] from an Anglo point of view. The girls' strategy for embarrassing the boys publicly by "talking back" (Collins, 1998) may have been a more culturally responsive way to get them to change their behavior. Here, Kim's use of her adult racialized and gendered ways of challenging inequity momentarily silenced the girls' preadolescent racialized and gendered ways (Anzaldúa, 2007; Collins, 1998).

Delivery of Message. The girls set the date and time for the presentation and made sure all invited parties would

attend. Those included all fifth-grade students (two classes), the physical education teacher, classroom teachers, and the school principal. Their primary message was: "We want boys to treat girls fairly, equally, and respectfully during physical activities." In their presentation they identified "their concern," explained what they did to study their concern, shared what they learned, and expressed what they wanted to see happen with respect to how boys treated girls during physical activity (see Figure 3).

The girls decided who would present each part and practiced giving their presentation to Kim and Manal several times. The presentation took place on the final day of the study. The girls, Kim, and Manal set up the computer in Mr. H's classroom. All invitees were present except for the principal, who had been called away. The girls clustered together in the front of the room, and Kim sat by the computer to change the slides for the girls. Manal video recorded the presentation from the back of the room, where the boys gathered. When the presentation began, rather than each girl doing her part as planned, all five spoke in unison and read the entire PowerPoint presentation together as a collective voice. During the presentation, the audience had varying reactions. Several female students clapped when the girls pointed out what the boys were doing to prevent them from participating in activities. There were whispers among boys who clustered at the back of the class. And one classroom teacher and the physical education teachers nodded. When the girls finished, Kim reminded them to "ask for questions."

Kathy: Does anyone have any questions?

Britten: I want to know what a girly girl is.

Marie: A girl that's like, "Oh my god, I broke a nail."

Maria: A girl that's too prissy.

Maria: Does anybody else have any more questions? Ernie?

Ernie: You know how you said that the boys don't want you to play? Sometimes we're scared you will get hurt.

Mr. H (fifth-grade teacher): Yea, I was concerned about that too. I don't think that sometimes the boys don't want you to play; I sometimes think they are playing real rough, and you girls want to play and you can get hurt. Boys are physically stronger than you at this point.

Marie: No they are not. [Clapping from several girls at Marie's rebuttal.]

Maria: Thank you for your time.

Mr. H: Thank you, good job.

As the girls walked out of the room after the presentation, the other fifth-grade teacher, Mr. Garcia, made a point to tell them, "Girls do not pay attention to Mr. H,

How Boys Treat Girls

By

Kathy, Marie, Mary, Maria, Maggie Mae, Kim and Manal

Today's Message...

We want boys to treat girls fairly, equally, and respectfully during physical activities.

What is our concern?

- How some boys treat girls during physical activities.

What have we done to study our concern?

- We took pictures of things that help girls to be active and things that prevent girls from being active.
- We analyzed our photos to determine what was preventing some girls from being physically active.
- We interviewed the girls on how boys treat the girls during physical activity.
- We designed a survey to learn more about how boys treat the girls during physical activity.
- We surveyed a number of girls at our school and analyzed the survey data we collected.
- We made a presentation to report our learning.

What we learned...

- **How it makes girls feel when the boys won't let them play:**
 - It hurts our feelings.
 - We are disappointed.
 - We feel degraded.
 - It makes us angry.
 - It makes us mad and sad—especially when the boys call us names.
- **Why girls think the boys treat the girls unfairly:**
 - Some boys think girls are “girly girls.”
 - Some boys think that “girls are too weak.”
 - Some boys think that “the girls might get hurt.”
 - Some boys think “it’s a man’s game.”
 - Some boys think “that they are better than the girls.”
 - Some boys think that the “girls are stupid or dumb to think that they can play with the boys.”
 - Some boys say the girls are “weak, too short, too fragile, or that they might break a nail.”
 - Some boys don’t like some of the girls so they won’t let them play.
- **When the boys treat the girls unfairly in physical activity:**
 - At recess.
 - Before and after school.
 - During PE.
 - During music.
- **What excuses the boys make to prevent the girls from playing:**
 - Girls are too “girly girl and wear make-up.”
 - “You can’t play because you don’t know how to make a basket.”
 - The boys pretend they are not playing when the girls ask if they can play.
 - Girls are “not into sports.”
 - “We already have enough players.”
- **What the boys actually do to prevent the girls from playing:**
 - “They kick the girls off the playing area.”
 - Some boys “yell at the girls until they leave the playing area.”
 - Some boys “throw the ball at their face or stomach to make them leave.”

How we want the boys to treat girls

- Please stop calling us names.
- Please start treating us fairly, equally, and respectfully during physical activities.
- Please stop underestimating our physical abilities.
- Please stop hurting our feelings by degrading us.
- Please realize that sports are for girls too

Figure 3. PowerPoint presentation.

because girls can do anything they want.” Maggie Mae, “Yea, I know.” The girls returned to the library with Kim and Manal for a celebratory lunch and to talk about their impressions. Mr. Lopez, the physical education teacher, joined them and asked, “So what do you guys think about this research project?”

Maggie Mae: We got to do different things, and today it was fun because we got to tell the boys how we feel and the adults got to hear. It was cool.

Kim: So you liked that the adults got to hear that? How come?

Marie: Not to be mean or anything, but Mr. H. he’s a little rude, because he said the boys are a little too strong for the girls.

Mary: I think it was cool, because we showed the boys how they were treating us during physical activity.

Discussion

Through this inquiry, we began to better understand the conflicting racialized and gendered discourses around physical activity that these Borderland mestizas negotiated. The school discourses that supported the girls being physically active included: (a) all children should be physically active, thus, the availability of playground equipment and scheduled recess as well as regular physical education classes; (b) the school principal and classroom teachers giving the girls time for this project to support their becoming more physically active; and (c) the physical education teacher’s constant interest in learning about things that prevented the girls from being physically active at school.

These supportive discourses were in direct conflict with other racialized and gendered discourses that limited girls’ physical activity participation and included: (a) the boys actions and words that suggested physical activity is for them but not for girls; (b) the lunch monitors who ignored the fact that many girls were not being physically active because the boys were dominating the playground equipment as well as available spaces to play; (c) the school principal allowing the monitors to ignore girls’ and boys’ activity patterns; (d) the girls’ interests in being physically active versus the perception of others who labeled them as being uninterested in activity; (e) family obligations, such as household chores, tending to siblings, and doing homework being prioritized over physical activity; and (f) parents allowing the girls to watch several hours of television daily but not encouraging them to be physically active.

Through the girls’ negotiation of these conflicting discourses, we began to understand the middle spaces—

the times they named and resisted the limiting forms of racialized and gendered categorization that denied them opportunities to be physically active. For example, the girls’ desire to publicly name and challenge the boys’ attempt to push them out of physical activity, with comments such as “you’re a girly girl and you can’t play,” “you’re a woman and you should stay in your place,” “you’re not a boy,” “you have the wrong color of skin,” or “you’re weak, too fragile, or you might break a nail.” As Anzaldúa (2007) asserted, “Culture [read men] professes to protect women. Actually it keeps women in rigidly defined roles” (p. 39). In this case, the rigidly defined roles meant that boys, not girls, should be physically active and that boys, not girls, should be allowed to participate in activities in which injury might occur.

If we had not listened to these middle spaces in which the girls resisted the discourses limiting their physical activity (Anzaldúa, 2007; Jamieson, 2003), we might have told them how to challenge the racialized and gendered discourses they were facing. However, such action on our part would have devalued the girls’ perspectives as co-researchers and excluded them from conversations about change. Cook-Sather (2002) encouraged educational researchers to “...seriously question the assumption that we know more than the young people of today...it is time that we count students among those with the authority to participate both in the critique and the reform” (p. 3).

From listening to the middle spaces (Jamieson, 2003), we learned the girls were articulate in explaining what they considered a “crisis” of inequity around physical activity opportunities for girls at their school. Further, when asked, they had ideas about how to change the inequities they identified. What they did not have was a space in the traditional school curriculum to learn and practice strategies they could use to challenge these inequities and change their worlds to increase their activity opportunities.

Given the girls’ lack of opportunity in the traditional school curriculum to learn strategies for changing their worlds, we saw an opportunity to respond to their needs and interests (Cook-Sather, 2002). By inviting the girls to be co-researchers in studying their physical activity barrier, they began to deconstruct the inequity and discuss ways to challenge the boys. This is important for teachers to understand, because, as Davies (2000) claimed, often women and children are not seen as capable of exercising agency to transform inequities. To the contrary, these girls showed great interest in publicizing the inequity they identified and worked hard to inspire change. They wanted to use public language to inspire change. Weedon (1997) wrote, “Once language is understood in terms of competing discourses, competing ways of giving meaning to the world...then language becomes an important site of political struggle” (p. 23).

By publicly challenging the conflicting racialized and gendered discourses, the girls were successful at brining

about change in subtle ways. First, over the course of the research their physical education teacher took an active interest in what we were learning. As he became aware of the girls' problems at recess, he talked with the people on recess duty and asked them to pay attention to the dynamics between boys and girls and make sure the girls had an opportunity to play. The physical education teacher also began to pay more attention to how the girls and boys interacted during physical education. Although the girls did not talk about the boys' behaviors in physical education class, their teacher actively worked to make sure no one was denied an opportunity to participate.

When girls in the Borderlands have an opportunity to critically study barriers to their physical activity, researchers and teachers can begin to understand the middle spaces in which girls resist racialized and gendered discourses around physical activity. Through this knowledge, we see that lack of physical activity isn't because these "minority girls don't like activity," it is because they have to negotiate and challenge forms of sexism and racism to simply have the *chance* to be active. As Anzaldúa (2007) wrote:

The work of *mestiza* consciousness is to break down the subject-object duality that keeps her prisoner and to show in the flesh and through the images in her work how duality is transcended. The answer to the problem between the white race and the colored, between males and females, lies in healing the split that originates in the very foundation of our lives, our culture, our languages, our thoughts (p. 102).

For those who have a vested interest in helping girls and boys learn how to be physically active for a lifetime, we need to create opportunities in our schools, physical education classes, and research agendas that assist girls and boys in naming, challenging, and ultimately changing all sorts of inequity that prevent or deny young people the opportunities to play.

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