

# **Girly Girls Can Play Games / Las Niñas Pueden Jugar Tambien: Co-Creating a Curriculum of Possibilities With Fifth-Grade Girls**

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Drawing on feminist, poststructural, and critical theories, the purpose of this research was to understand 5th-grade girls' self-identified barriers to physical activity and work with them to find ways of negotiating those barriers in order to increase their physical activity opportunities. We worked with 11 girls in two elementary schools in southwestern United States. Data were collected over the 2005–2006 school year. Data sources included (a) 23 transcribed audio recordings, (b) field notes, (c) planning notes, (d) task sheets, (e) artifacts created by the girls and the principal investigator, and (f) photos the girls took. Our interpretations are presented in two sections. First, the girls explained that being a “girly girl” hindered their activity participation because a “girly girl” does not want to “sweat,” “mess up her hair and nails,” “mess up her nice clothes,” and sometimes wears “flip-flops.” Second, we discuss how we and the girls created a curriculum of possibilities that culminated in developing a book of physical activities that girly girls would enjoy.

**Keywords:** Mexican-American girls, physical education, race and gender, activist research, agency, child-designed games

## **Girls and Physical Activity**

For years, scholars have documented the need for children's physical activity as paramount to their health and well-being (Kientzler, 1999; McDonough & Crocker, 2005). However, trends show declining physical activity among many children, especially girls and minorities (Gordon-Larsen, Adair, & Popkin, 2001;

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Wolf et al., 1993). Given the declining levels of girls and minority children's physical activity, scholars have sought to identify the barriers that prevent them from being physically active and have suggested ways of better meeting their activity needs (McKenzie et al., 2002; Trost et al., 2002).

For example, Wilson, Williams, Evans, Mixon, and Rheaume (2005) suggest designing interventions that include a variety of physical activities, provide girls with choices, and make girls part of the intervention design process. Wolf et al. (1993) claim that we need a better understanding of racial, ethnic, and age differences in activity levels if we hope to design useful intervention programs. McDonough and Crocker (2005) call for considering the complexity of girls' social contexts, especially friendships, to better understand "what motivates girls to go out and play" (p. 466). Kientzler (1999) suggests that listening to girls and learning about their perspectives on physical activity is paramount to "circumvent the steady decline of girls' participation in physical activity" (p. 414).

While these suggestions do provide us with useful information, there are two additional problems. First, as Kientzler (1999) points out, these are *researchers'* suggestions about how to intervene, rather than suggestions made by girls. Missing are in-depth, qualitative—as well as critically, ethnically, and culturally contextualized—research reports about girls' self-identified physical activity barriers, and ways of working with girls to help them learn to negotiate those barriers. In some ways, this is not surprising when we consider that often girls and minorities are overlooked as having valuable suggestions on how to improve their life situations. In other words, girls and minorities are not viewed as agenic, or as having the capacity to recognize opportunities and make changes in their lives (Davies, 2000).

## **Discourses of Gender, Race/Ethnicity, and Physical Activity in School**

The second problem, which a variety of feminist and poststructural scholars have noted, is that "the girl" is often constructed as "the problem," rather than the gender discourses that hinder girls' interest in or opportunity to participate in a variety of physical activities (Azzarito, Solmon, & Harrison, 2006; Flintoff & Scraton, 2001; Wright, 1995, 1999). For example, Flintoff and Scraton (2001) argue that girls are perceived as a problem in coeducational physical education classes because discourses of femininity are produced and reproduced in the educational environment. Similarly, Wright (1999) found that "girls increasingly became constructed as problems, as resisters who avoided physical education any way they could, who had less skill and less enthusiasm" (p. 182). Her claim is that students are actually marginalized in physical activity settings because of cultural constructions of femininity and masculinity, not because girls are girls.

These same scholars have spent years documenting discourses that limit girls' participation in physical activity and have provided suggestions for future research (Azzarito & Solmon, 2005; Oliver & Lalik, 2004a; Vertinsky, 1992; Wright, 1995; 1999). For example, Wright (1995) claims that we not only must reconsider the dominant place that games and sport continue to hold in physical education curricula, but also we need to develop alternative curricula and classroom practices that challenge patriarchal discourses in order to benefit girls and boys. She later

suggests that we need more examples of how teachers can challenge narrow constructions of gender and provide students opportunities to engage in physical education environments that give them pleasure and that “enhance students’ capacity to use their bodies in space with confidence and skill” (Wright, 1999, p. 194). Similarly Azzarito, Solmon, and Harrison (2006) encourage researchers to “explore ways to disrupt gender discourses and understand how to create welcoming and encouraging physical education contexts” (p. 238).

Scholars in physical education have repeatedly theorized how gendered discourses influence girls’ embodiment and participation in physical activity, and scholars of color (Anzaldúa, 2007; Cruz, 2006) remind us that the intersections of gender, race, sexuality, ethnicity, age, and so on are central to understanding girls’ experiences. In physical education, we are starting to see more work that focuses on the intersections of race, religion, gender, and sexuality (Azzarito & Solmon, 2005; Hamzeh, 2007; Hills, 2006; Oliver & Lalik, 2000, 2001, 2004b). For example, Hamzeh (2007) found in her work with Muslim girls that their physical activity participation was often limited because of religious rules regulating girls’ dress and public presence with boys. She suggests that teachers and researchers need to help girls challenge unquestioned gender/religious discourses of Islam so that they might find ways to increase their physical activity opportunities.

Azzarito and Solmon (2005) reported that young people’s meanings about the gendered body intersected with the racial body and functioned to circumscribe girls’ practice and access to physical activities. They claim that constructing more equitable physical education contexts and not tolerating sexism and racism are important to any physical education intervention. Oliver and Lalik (2000, 2004b) also found that the intersections of race and gender were critical to how girls were learning to think about their bodies and recommended that teachers and researchers try to understand how this intersection influences girls’ health-related choices.

Lastly, Hills’s (2006) work illustrates how heteronormative discourses of femininity mold girls’ physicality, thereby influencing the types of activities they choose. She suggests that teachers encourage girls to reflect on the impact of how social and cultural discourses regulate female physicality. Further, she suggests teachers provide opportunities for girls to have more positive and empowering experiences of physical activity (Hills, 2006).

We argue that thoughtful consideration needs to be paid to the suggestions these scholars have made about the need to examine the intersectionality of normative discourses if we hope to develop activity programs that better meet the needs of girls. There is a serious need to go beyond placing blame—whether that blame is on the girls themselves, or on the discourses that hinder girls’ activity participation. It is important to start moving beyond only documenting “*what is*,” and begin exploring “*what can be*” (Weis & Fine, 2004).

## Developing a Language of Possibility

We find that feminist, poststructural, and critical theories can help scholars make the shift to exploring “*what can be*.” We can do this by engaging in research proj-

ects that collaborate with participants in developing a language of possibility. That is, assisting participants in naming possibilities for change so that transformation might begin (Fine, 1994; Giroux, 1997). Giroux (1997) writes,

a critical pedagogy has to begin with a dialectical celebration of the languages of critique and possibility—an approach which finds its noblest expression in a discourse integrating critical analysis with social transformation . . . [around] problems rooted in the concrete experiences of everyday life (p. 132). By making girls' everyday experiences central to the research we are able to see the circulating discourses that shape their subjectivities, search for places to explore their agency, and work collaboratively with them to practice change (Davies, 2000; Weis & Fine, 2004; Weedon, 1997; Weiler, 1988).

*Subjectivity* is the name given to the “conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of herself and her ways of understanding her relation to the world” (Weedon, 1997, p. 32). People's subjectivities are dynamic and multiple, constantly positioned in relation to the circulating discourses and practices. “Further, the discourses and practices through which we are constituted are also often in tension, one with another, providing the human subject with multiple layers of contradictory meanings which are inscribed in their bodies and in their conscious and unconscious minds” (Davies, 2003, p. 11). Girls as thinking and feeling subjects, constantly read, negotiate, accept, reject, and alter the social discourses they experience. Thus, subjectivity is always in process, and therefore is open to change (Davies, 2000).

From a feminist poststructural perspective, viewing subjectivity as a process open to change does not mean denying the importance of any particular form of being (Weedon, 1997). Rather, it provides insights into the values and practices that hold existing norms in place. Through recognition of how norms function in girls' lives, we can begin to see these norms not as absolutes, but rather as structures that can be acted upon by both individuals and groups. Whereas the constitutive power of normative structures must be recognized, “the possibility that it can also be laughed out of existence, played with, disrupted, or used to manufacture new possibilities, can also be recognized” (Davies, 2003, p. 200).

This recognition of new possibilities creates opportunities for girls to explore their agency. According to Davies (2000), *agency* is

the discursive constitution of a particular individual as having presence (rather than absence), as having access to a subject position in which they have the right to speak and be heard . . . author of their own multiple meanings and desires . . . one who can go beyond the given meaning in any one discourse and forge something new . . . through imagining not what *is* but what *might be*.” (p. 66)

Based on this idea that norms are not absolutes and the importance of creating possibilities for agency in the lives of girls, the purpose of this research was two-fold: (a) to understand 5th-grade girls' self-identified barriers to physical activity and (b) to work with them to find ways of negotiating those barriers so as to increase their physical activity participation.

## Methods

This study is a feminist activist research project. Essential to an activist stance is that researchers and girls be engaged as critical participants in conversations of power (Fine, 1994). Fine (1994) suggests that the “strength of activist research lies in its ability to open contradictions and conflicts within collaborative practices” (p. 23).

### Settings and Participants

This study took place in two elementary schools in a rural border community in southwestern United States. The county where the schools were located is the poorest in the state. Schools were selected by the director of instruction for the district because they had high percentages of economically disadvantaged students, and she thought the principals would most appreciate the opportunity to have their students participate in the project.

School A—Frida Kahlo Elementary, was the oldest school in the district. It was established in 1948 and is known locally as the “bilingual school.” It is located in the oldest and poorest part of the city. The playground is small and mostly dirt, with two concrete areas that serve as basketball courts. At the time of the study, there were approximately 366 students—94.3% were Hispanic, 2.6% were Caucasian, and 2.6% were African American. Ninety-six percent of the student population was economically disadvantaged, 33% of the students were English language learners, and the student-to-teacher ratio was 13 to 1 (official school documents).

School B—McAuliffe Elementary, was the newest school in the district. It was established in 2003 and is located at the borders of an older, more rural area and a newly developing part of town. The playgrounds have ample grass space, plenty of playground equipment, and nice basketball courts. At the time of the study, there were approximately 485 students—84.1% were Hispanic, 13.3% were Caucasian, and 2.2% were African American. Eighty-one percent of the student population was economically disadvantaged, 38% of the students were English language learners, and the student-to-teacher ratio was 16 to 1 (official school documents).

This article reports on part of a larger project in which we worked with three groups of 5th-grade girls. Before selecting girls for this project, we discussed with the two school physical education teachers and principals our interest in working with girls who did not seem to be as physically active as other children. We asked the physical education teachers to identify girls who they believed were not as active as other children during physical education or recess, or who they believed did not enjoy physical education. We were particularly keen to attract girls who were, from the teacher’s perspective, resistant to physical education, resistant to physical activity, or simply viewed as inactive. We believed that by having the physical education teachers select the participants for this study we might learn more about finding ways of working with girls who are positioned by others as “inactive.” Children in both schools attended physical education two times per week for 30 min each class. Both physical education programs were a combina-

tion of the Coordinated Approach to Child Health (CATCH) physical education and sports skills. We obtained informed consent from the girls and their parents, and pseudonyms are used throughout for both the schools and girls.

As mentioned, this article focuses on two groups of 5th-grade girls from two schools. At Frida Kahlo Elementary, we worked with four Mexican-American 11-year-old girls—Monique, Matilde, Rosalyn, and Suzette. At the time of the study, Monique spoke only Spanish and understood very little English. Like Monique, Matilde was also born in Mexico. Her first language is Spanish and she is bilingual. Rosalyn comes from a large Mexican family. She reported in her personal biography that her family influences her physical activity participation. Suzette is also bilingual, with Spanish as her first language. Like Rosalyn, Suzette also enjoys physical activity with family members. All four girls reported that they enjoyed physical activity outside of school.

At McAuliffe Elementary, we worked with six 10- to 11-year-old girls. Amy, Jazzy, and Sunshine identified as Mexican-American; Gabby and Neicy, as Hispanic; and Kat as White. Sunshine and Gabby were bilingual. Jazzy and Kate reported in their personal biographies that they enjoyed physical activity with family members. All five girls reported that they enjoyed physical activity outside of school more than inside school. In addition, Neicy, Jazzy, and Kat were all considered popular at their school and played an active role in student government.

Whereas the 11 girls were insiders in this study, researchers Kim and Manal were in-betweeners/outsideers (Anzaldúa, 2007; Hill-Collins, 1990). At the time of the study, Kim was 38 years old. She identified as White, middle class, married heterosexual, physically active, and able bodied. She is fluent in only English but can read some Spanish words. Although her race, age, social class, language, and career position her as an outsider (Hill-Collins, 1990), her sexuality and embodied understanding of being “girly” throughout her life position her as an in-betweeners (Anzaldúa, 2007).

At the time of the study, Manal was 43 years old. She identified as a cross-class arab-muslim, queer, physically active, able-bodied woman. The self-identification as *arab-muslim*, not capitalized, represented the author’s analytical non-essentializing category of subjectivity, in which Arabic is her first language and Islam is her reinterpreted culture. She is multilingual; proficient in English and Arabic, and in American and Jordanian Sign Languages. She can also read and understand beginner-level Spanish. Manal spent 17 years working as an educational audiologist in North Africa and the Middle East. She lived and worked in Washington DC and Europe for several years before beginning doctoral work in curriculum and instruction. Personally and professionally, her experience in crossing cultures and languages positions her as an in-betweeners (Anzaldúa, 2007). Her age, race, sexuality, and academic position situate her as an outsider (Hill-Collins, 1990).

In addition, researcher Nate served as our peer debriefer, with whom we consulted throughout the project. Specifically, we would share our ideas and interpretations with Nate because having an outsider who was not working directly with the girls sometimes helped us to clarify what we were thinking and doing.

## Data Collection

Before beginning data collection in August 2005, we conducted a six-month pilot study with the sole intent of learning ways to communicate with predominantly Mexican-American and Hispanic 5th-grade girls about their physical activity interests, opportunities, and barriers. What we learned was similar to what we know about working with adolescents (Oliver & Lalik, 2000). That is, although necessary, simply interviewing students several times for short periods of time is insufficient for understanding the complexities and nuances of their worlds. Thus, drawing on Oliver's previous work, we developed and planned a variety of strategies for working with the girls (Lalik & Oliver, 2007; Oliver & Lalik, 2000, 2001, 2004a, 2004b).

Data were collected over the 2005–2006 academic school year. Each Friday we met with either one or both groups of girls for approximately 45 to 60 min. On average, we met with each group three times per month between August and May. At Frida Kahlo Elementary, we met with the girls during their regular class time because both the principal and the classroom teachers believed that the project was important and would be beneficial to these particular girls because they were identified by their physical education teacher as disliking physical activity. We met in a variety of places, including an empty classroom, the library, or the playground, depending on what we were doing and the space that was available.

At McAuliffe Elementary, we met with the girls during their physical education and music classes. The physical education teacher believed this project would be an appropriate way for the girls to get their physical education. He talked with the music teacher and she let them out of music on the days that they were with us. We met in a cafeteria area that included a stage and some space to move around on the floor. Occasionally, we went outside under the covered sidewalks in the front of the school.

With Kim and Manal's help, the girls pursued several activities. The first set of activities was designed to help us learn more about the girls and to help them identify things that hindered or prevented them from being physically active. These tasks included (a) developing personal biographies, (b) taking photos of things that help girls to be physically active and things that prevent girls from being physically active, and (c) conducting individual and group analyses of the girls' photographs to identify major themes that influenced their activity participation. The second set of activities was designed to co-create a physical activity curriculum of possibilities with the intent of helping the girls learn to negotiate the things that they identified as interfering with their activity participation. These included (a) exploring sporting-goods magazines to identify types of equipment that girls might like to use in their pursuits of physical activity, (b) providing girls with jump bands and journals to create and document games that girls enjoy playing, and (c) collectively creating a book of physical activities tailored to girls' interests.

We met each week to plan the sessions with the girls. We identified what we wanted to learn, planned the tasks in ways that we thought the girls would find enjoyable, and talked about how to be responsive to what the girls shared (Oliver & Lalik, 2004a). To keep the girls' voices central to the research and remain

responsive to their perspectives, we planned only one day at a time, enacting our plan and reflecting on what happened before planning subsequent work sessions.

For example, immediately following each session, Kim and Manal talked and audiotaped their initial impressions. We discussed what we learned from the girls, questions we had, things we wanted to pursue further, points of confusion for the girls, and so on. Kim and Manal also individually wrote field notes after each session. Emilia, a graduate assistant, transcribed the audio-recorded sessions. Last, we read the transcriptions separately, making notes of things we needed to pursue further.

Using our annotated transcriptions, our field notes, and any of the artifacts created by the girls, we held extensive planning meetings during which we designed the next work session, creating and refining tasks based on what we were learning from our initial analyses. We constantly looked for ways to support the girls in naming their self-identified barriers to physical activity as well as ways to negotiate those barriers. Our debriefing and planning often led us back to the girls to seek additional information about their perspectives. That is, Kim asked the girls to further explain or elaborate on previous discussions. Other times, she asked them to critique things she or they were saying and doing.

For example, Kim said,

Do you remember when we were here last time, we talked about things that prevented you from being active and some of you, Kat—I think it was you—said, “sometimes the boys will tell girls that you can’t play a particular activity because it’s a boy activity, not a girl thing,” and Neicy you said that “sometimes they won’t let you play because you aren’t part of their special group,” and Sunshine, you said, “boys think that certain activities are for them and not for you.” Do you remember that conversation? Can you think of other examples from school where people or things or places prevented you or other girls from being active?

The constant revisiting of ideas helped us to analyze what was taking place as the year progressed. It also helped us to interpret and reinterpret what was happening in response to Lather’s (1991) challenge for creating more systematic efforts to establish trustworthiness of the data, 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

As one aspect of triangulating our data (Lather, 1986), we collected multiple sources. These included the following: (a) 23 transcribed audio recordings of our work sessions; (b) field notes that Kim and Manal took after their work sessions; (c) notes that Kim took during their planning meetings; (d) task sheets created for the work sessions; (e) notes Kim took from conversations with the physical education teachers, school principals, and participants’ parents, (f) artifacts created by the girls and Kim (written in both English and Spanish); (g) photos the girls took; and (h) individual and group analyses of the girls’ photographs. In all, we ana-



lyzed 23 audiotapes, 425 pages of transcriptions from audio recordings, 62 pages of debriefing and field notes, 110 pages of student-generated artifacts, and 75 photographs.

To further facilitate trustworthiness, we followed Tesch's (1990) outline for developing an organizing system, segmenting data, and making connections. Our strategies for data analysis were also informed by Bogdan and Biklen (1998) and Hutchinson (1990), who suggest general guidelines for analytical processes.

To begin, we organized the data chronologically for each group of girls, paginating it, copying it, and filing it by session date and by school. Each of us separately read all transcripts, listened to audio recordings of each of the work sessions, and examined all field notes, debriefing notes, and student-generated artifacts. We made notations in the margins about insights we each generated during this phase.

Next, we brought our individual analyses together and revisited all the data to determine the things that the girls identified as preventing them from being active as well as our work with them to help them negotiate these things. We took turns sharing our insights and challenging each others' interpretations, making new interpretations where necessary. We organized our data into the three categories: (a) things that facilitated girls' physical activity, (b) things that hindered or prevented girls' physical activity, and (c) ways we worked with the girls to help them negotiate the things they identified as problematic to their participation in activity. These categories reflected the main foci of our study; thus, we used them in our initial analysis. We further used these categories as a basis for writing a narrative of the project based on our two research questions.

Throughout the analysis, we attempted to sustain collective reflexivity (Knight, Bentley, Norton, & Dixon, 2004; Lather, 1986). Knight (2004) and her colleagues write, "Reflexivity, as critical reflection, has been used as a methodological tool to examine researcher's fluid positionalities, research participant's exertion of agency and power" (p. 392).

In our attempts to be reflexive, we had numerous conversations about our different positionalities and how to best keep the girls' voices at the center of the research (Anzaldúa, 2007; Weis & Fine, 2004; Hill-Collins, 1990). For example, going into the study we were prepared to be responsive to the possible ways that race influenced the girls' activity participation and we often discussed our intuitive impressions (Anzaldúa, 2007; Delgado Bernal, 2002) of what we were hearing during data collection and analysis. Kim would wonder out loud, "how much of this do you think is machismo culture and how much of this is gender discourse around physical activity?" Manal, as a woman of color, would often respond, "you are over essentializing this part of the Mexican culture. It is the same as when people see the veil as the only representation of being an Arab Muslim woman." Manal's act of continually questioning Kim's racial impressions repeatedly took us back to the girls' words.

Another means of keeping the girls' voices central to the research required that we address our own inadequacy in speaking Spanish. Rather than not include girls who only spoke Spanish, we attempted to be linguistically responsive (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2007) to find ways to listen/dialogue with all the girls the physical education teachers selected for participation. We worked hard to take seriously Anzaldúa's (2007) warning that "ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identi-

ty—I am my language . . . as long as I have to accommodate the English speakers rather than having them accommodate me, my tongue will be illegitimate” (p. 81).

For example, we asked a Mexican undergraduate exchange student in physical education, Antonio, who was at the time of this study doing a practicum at Frida Kahlo, to work with us as an in-betweener (Anzaldúa, 2007) so that we could better communicate with Monique, who preferred to speak only Spanish. After every session for the first four months of the study, Kim and Manal would meet with Antonio to discuss what we were learning and what we did not understand of the girls’ talk when it was only in Spanish. In addition, when we recognized that Matilde was constantly speaking Spanish with Monique, we asked her if she would interpret for us so that Monique could be actively included in the dialogue—something she did throughout the project. We found that being reflexive to our different positionalities (Knight et al., 2004) and actively listening to the girls’ language and knowledge sources helped us to better follow their leads, thus keeping them central to the research.

## Interpretations

Our interpretations are presented in two sections relative to the twofold purpose of the study. In the first section, we discuss the gender/race discourse around physical activity that circulated within both schools. This discourse creates the backdrop for better understanding the girls’ barriers to physical activity in school. In the second section, we highlight the process of working with the girls as they negotiated the gender/race discourse to help them see ways to increase their physical activity opportunities. Here we co-created a curriculum of possibilities to begin practicing change with the girls (Weis & Fine, 2004).

### School, Physical Activity, and Gender/Race Discourse

Culture forms our beliefs. We perceive the version of reality that it communicates. Dominant paradigms, predefined concepts that exist as unquestionable, unchallengeable, are transmitted to us through culture. Culture is made by those in power—men. Males make the rules and laws; women transmit them (Anzaldúa, 2007, p. 38).

**“You’re a Girly Girl and Can’t Play”—Frida Kahlo Elementary.** At Frida Kahlo Elementary, children had opportunities for free play on three occasions during the day: before school, midday, and lunch recesses. Here the children were allowed to take playground equipment outside for a variety of activities. Usually the children selected to play basketball, soccer, or kickball or to play on the playground equipment. According to the girls, there were spaces that the “boys” claimed as “theirs” and the remaining spaces were left for the girls. Frequently, the boys dominated the basketball courts and left the swings to the girls (field notes [FN] / transcripts [T]).

On most occasions, the boys and girls played separate games. However, there were particular girls at the school who desired playing with the boys and some-

times, as Matilde said, these girls “were allowed to play” but not often. The girls described the boys’ pattern of behavior and reported that they often made up excuses, said Rosalyn imitating the boys, such as “you’re a girly girl and can’t play,” or “you’re too weak to play with us and you should go do girly things” (T/FN).

The physical education teacher also commented throughout the study about the problems that the boys and girls had playing together during recess and physical education. The girls in this study, with the exception of Monique, did not seem to talk much about the boys’ behavior because they did not want to play with them anyway. Nonetheless, they were aware of what was happening. Monique one day explained that she liked playing with the boys, and, even though they would often invite her to play because she was highly skilled at basketball and soccer, they would not allow her friends to play. Thus, she was left to decide whether to play only with the boys or find something else to do with her friends, and she usually chose her friends. That the boys positioned the girls as “girly girls” to keep the games all boy was part of the school’s gender/race discourse that shaped the context with which the girls lived (FN/T).

**“The Boys”—McAuliffe Elementary.** The gender/race discourse that circulated at McAuliffe Elementary had a tone different from the one at Frida Kahlo. Early in the study, the girls talked about the problems that were happening at recess and how these problems were being solved by the school principal. The girls reported that 5th- grade boys “mostly from the bilingual class [Mexican and Mexican-American]” were “being too competitive” and “too aggressive” in their game play. Gabbi described it as follows: “the boys think that they are in the World Cup and like to show off” (T/FN).

Rather than deal directly with the boys who were engaging in this type of physical activity, the principal decided that it would be better to simply take away all playground equipment during recess. His logic, according to the physical education teacher, was that if the kids did not have the equipment, they could not play so rough and the problems would cease. The ban on playground equipment lasted throughout most of the study and contributed to the girls’ lack of physical activity opportunities as they reported (FN).

**“Girly Girls.”** With the gender/race discourse around physical activity as a backdrop, early in the research the girls introduced the construct of “girly girl” as pivotal to understanding what prevented them from being physically active at school. It surfaced during a photographic analysis for which we asked them to “take pictures of things that prevent girls from being physically active.” They explained that being “girly girl” often hindered some girls’ activity participation because a “girly girl” does not want to “sweat,” “mess up her hair and nails,” or “mess up her nice clothes,” and sometimes wears “flip-flops” (T/FN/Photo Analysis [PA]).

Sunshine explained that “girly girls” do not like to play sports like football and soccer because “you get all sweaty and yucky.” In addition to not wanting to sweat, Matilde explained that “girly girls” are worried about their “hair standing up,” as well as being “scared they’d break a nail.” Suzette claimed that girly girls “like looking perfect.” Thus, according to Neicy, girly girls “don’t want to partici-

pate in physical activity because they care more about their hair and nails than running or anything” (T).

It would be easy to interpret this passage as girls buying into and thus regulating their bodies around notions of heteronormative femininity (Butler, 1993). Without trying to listen and learn more about how the enactment of girly girl was manifested in these girls’ lives, and specifically their physical activity participation patterns, we would have continued to perpetuate the notion that the girls are the problem, and more specifically, that Mexican-American girls are the problem. It would also be easy to keep the focus on gender/race/sexuality discourses as the problems to girls’ physical inactivity. We worked hard to listen to these girls without making the judgment that a girly girl or heteronormative Mexican values are a problem. Thus, we left ourselves open to learn more about how these girls’ fluid embodiment of girly girl positioned them as active agents in their worlds (Azzarito, Solmon, & Harrison, 2006; Davies, 2000).

The girls’ description of being girly girl was a fluid, temporal, and partial embodiment (Davies, 2000). As Kat stated, “I’m like 80% girly girl and 20% not girly girl.” Likewise, Niecy reported, “I’m sometimes a girly girl.” “It depends on how my day is already going . . . if you smell good . . . or are clean and fresh . . . then you want to be a girly girl,” claimed Amy. She further elaborates, “It also depends on the days we have PE. If it’s a PE day, I will be really really active. . . . We are more girly girl on a non-PE day” (T/PA).

These girls were often strategic in performing girly girl when it served their mood or physical activity opportunities. Sunshine explained, “Sometimes if I don’t like the sport they are playing in PE, then I’m a girly girl.” Kim asked, “So on PE days, most of the time you are not girly girl right? Unless you don’t like an activity . . . so girly girl becomes your excuse for not doing the sport. Is that how it works?” Sunshine replied, “Yeah.” Kim responded, “That is a really interesting strategy for getting out of being active” (T/PA).

These 11 girls helped us to understand the complexity of being girly girl. On the one hand, given the way the girls described girly girl we could have read it as a fixed and unitary subjectivity (Davies, 2000). That is, girly girls “don’t want to sweat,” “don’t want to mess up their hair and nails,” and “like wearing nice clothes,” and that is why they “don’t like physical activity.” However, as we continued listening we began to recognize how the girls described the fluidity of being girly girl (Davies, 2000; Weedon, 1997).

For these girls, being girly girl was more than “not wanting to sweat,” or not wanting to “mess up their hair and nails”; it was a discourse that they could use to articulate one of their subjectivities and an embodiment that they could easily perform to get what they desired. However, their ability to use their girly girl discourse was a double-edged sword. On the one hand, when the girls chose to not participate in activities they didn’t like and used being “girly girl” as their excuse, no one would acknowledge, question, or challenge this embodiment because it fit so well within the dominant discourse of heteronormative femininity within the larger Mexican culture (Anzaldúa, 2007; Bordo, 1993; Butler, 1993). On the other hand, because girly girl *is* such a normalized discourse, no one questioned whether there might be some other explanation as to why the girls were not participating in physical activity.

## “Girly Girls Can Play Games Too:” Co-Creating a Curriculum of Possibilities

As feminist activist scholars, we believed that part of what we needed to do was to look at what we were learning from the girls as if things could be different. We wanted to use our positions of authority in ways that allowed us and the girls to see and then enact alternative possibilities that might better suit the girls’ needs.

**Exploring Physical Activity Possibilities.** After spending two sessions in which the girls thoroughly explained how embodying girly girl functioned in their lives or the lives of their friends, we were still trying to understand how being a girly girl worked with respect to physical activity. Sunshine’s comment about using girly girl as an excuse to get out of physical activity during physical education when she did not like a particular sport created an opportunity to discuss the types of activities the girls at McAuliffe did not like and why they did not like them. The girls discussed not liking “football,” “soccer,” “basketball,” and “Frisbee” in physical education. They explained that they did not like these sports “because the boys kick your feet,” “trip you on purpose,” “push you down,” and “grab your hair” (T/FN).

Kim asked, “So it isn’t the sport that you don’t like necessarily, it’s the way the sport is being played? So if the boys are kicking you or tripping you or pulling your hair or not giving you the ball those kinds of things. . . .” Sunshine cut her off, “You feel left out and hurt.” Kim continued, “We’re trying to figure out, if there are a lot of girls that are girly girls or identify as girly girls, they should be able to be active in ways that are. . . .” Sunshine cut her off again, “Suitable for them.” “Yes, that are suitable, wouldn’t you think?” asked Kim (T).

Kim continued, “How could we be more active on our girly girl days? Because you have to have your girly girl days, I understand this.” Sunshine explained that if girls “felt comfortable with themselves [they] would be able to do physical activity.” This was a turning point in the study. It was then that we began to better understand the complexity of physical activity in the girls’ lives. What seemed to be happening initially was that the girls talked about their physical activity barriers only in relation to being girly girl. But as we listened longer, we began to hear how the girls used their girly girl language of embodiment as a way to express additional barriers that hindered their physical activity participation. That is, the girls did not like the choices of activities available at school, did not like how the activities were played (when playing with boys), did not like getting hurt or being left out, and wanted to be able to play and “feel comfortable with themselves.” Thus, rather than play in situations they identified as unsuitable, they chose not to participate (T/FN).

Given the interconnection between being girly girl and the barriers the girls identified within the larger physical activity context in their schools, we decided to invite the girls to make up games or activities that girls who identified as “girly girl” might enjoy doing. We made a conscious decision to use the girls’ language around the barriers they associated with being girly girl as the central themes for the games, while still searching for alternative possibilities for physical activity engagement (planning meeting [PM]).

The next week we brought a set of jump bands to both schools and taught the girls how to do a variety of jumping patterns. We spent the entire class period

jumping. We selected jump bands as the activity because it was novel, yet familiar. That is, all of these girls had jumped rope at some point in their lives, yet they had never had opportunities to use jump bands. We then gave each girl a journal and both groups in each school a set of jump bands and invited them to “make up games with their friends” that girls who “didn’t want to sweat, mess up their hair or nails, mess up their nice clothes, etc.” might enjoy playing. We asked them to create and play these games at recess, write them up in their journals, and report to us what they learned. Only one girl used her journal as we intended, the other girls reported verbally what games they created and played at recess (task sheets [TS]/FN/T).

Kim asked the girls from Frida Kahlo, “So, what types of things did you do with the jump bands this week, anything?” Matilde and Suzette indicated that they “did not make up any games,” but that they “just played the games that you showed us.” They went on to explain that “they jumped the entire recess” and that all the girls they played with “enjoyed using the jump bands.” The girls from McAuliffe indicated that they did make up games with the jump bands and that “they got whole bunch of girls to play at recess.” Their games, as they called them, included variations of jumping patterns that Kim originally taught them (T/FN).

***Practicing Change Through Game Play.*** At this point, we realized that the girls needed more guidance in game creation. On the several occasions when asked to make up games on their own, most just repeated what we had taught them, or added a few variations. We wondered whether it might be more meaningful if we worked as a group to create games. Thus, we asked the girls if they would like to “make up a book of physical activities that girly girls would enjoy playing.” The girls from both schools indicated that they would enjoy this task (PM/T).

For the next seven sessions, we worked with each group of girls to co-create games that girls could play while simultaneously being girly girl. For each theme that the girls identified as part of being girly girl and therefore a barrier to their physical activity (i.e., don’t want to sweat, mess up hair or nails, mess up nice clothes, and wear flip-flops), as well as days when they “didn’t have equipment” (at McAuliffe) or “the boys would let them play” (at Frida Kahlo), we (a) made up games, (b) played the games, (c) decided what modifications or changes were needed to the games, (d) wrote up the games using a form we designed to help structure game creation, (e) tested the games with the other group of girls, and (f) discussed whether they liked the game and why or why not. In the next section, we provide a description of this process (TS/T/PA).

Kim, “Okay, so what theme do you want to make up a game for?” Rosalyn says, “Nice Clothes Day.” After the girls decided on their theme, we pulled out our bag of equipment, which included jump bands, beach balls, koosh balls, soccer balls, colored flags, juggling scarves, and nerf sponge balls. We brought this equipment because when we asked the girls to go through sporting-goods catalogs and select equipment that they thought girls would enjoy using, these items were among what they chose (T).

The girls immediately started talking and digging through the equipment to get what they wanted. Rosalyn and Suzette talked in English, whereas Matilde and Monique spoke in Spanish. They selected various pieces of equipment and tried to figure out what they wanted to do. Usually, one girl had an idea, shared

this with the group, and then the other three would chime in with their suggestions (FN/T).

Eventually, they shaped their activities into something that resembled games. At this point, Kim began asking questions to help them clarify, narrow, or further elaborate their efforts. Once the game was created to everyone's satisfaction, the girls and Kim played it "until they got tired or bored." When they finished playing, Kim helped them fill out a game information sheet. A sample game information sheet is presented in Figure 1.

Of the 21 games that the girls created, 8 were tag-like games that sometimes included the use of equipment. For example, Color Tag Volleyball was a game the girls from Frida Kahlo created for days they "didn't want to break a nail." Here the object of the game is to keep the beach ball in the air by passing it back and forth to your partner while simultaneously being chased by the other group of two as they attempt to steal the colored flags attached at the waist. So not only are the girls who are not *it* running and fleeing, but they have added the skill requirement of passing a beach ball back and forth. Line Tag was a game the girls at McAuliffe created for "no equipment days." "The object of this game is for the people who are not *it* to run around the lines to stay away from the person(s) who is *it*. Everyone must run on the lines at all times, including the person who is *it*. If a person is tagged, they become *it*" (book [B]/T).

Further, 10 of the 21 games the girls created centered on skill. These games involved the use of some type of ball. For example, the girls at McAuliffe made up the the Jump Band Game for days when they "did not want to break a nail." The object of the game was to use the jump bands in traditional ways, which involved two end jumpers and two center jumpers. However, the two end jumpers were passing a ball back and forth trying to keep it away from the two center jumpers. The end jumpers earned 1 point for each time they caught the ball, and the center jumpers earned 1 point each time they stole the ball. This was a very highly skilled game because it required keeping rhythm during jumping patterns, as well as the skills of throwing, catching, and keeping the ball away from others (B/T).

Another example was Scarf Ball Keep Away, which the girls at Frida Kahlo created for "nice clothes days." Two outside people stand approximately 8 feet apart. Their objective is to pass a ball back and forth to each other, throwing and catching it in a scarf. The center two people try to steal the ball as it is being thrown with the use of their scarves. If the center people get the ball, they switch positions (B/T).

After completing 21 games (both groups combined), we had the girls play all the games one last time and we took pictures of them playing for their book. During these games, the girls and Kim played, laughed, got dirty, messed up their hair, wiped the sweat that ran down their faces, and thoroughly enjoyed themselves. Each picture revealed how absorbed the girls were in what they were doing, and their desire for activities that were meaningful to them (FN/T/photos [P]).

After testing each game one last time, we compiled all game sheets and photos, worked with each group to write an introduction, and created a table of contents and an equipment list. We also provided a blank game creation sheet for others to use. Each group then selected a title and color for their book. The girls from Frida Kahlo selected blue and purple and entitled their book "Girls Can Play

<p><b>Theme:</b> “<i>Nice Clothes Day</i>”</p> <p><b>Name of Activity:</b> <i>Runaway Kickball</i></p> <p><b>Game Created:</b> March 3, 2006</p> <p><b>How many people do you need to play this game?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 5-20 players</li> </ul> <p><b>Where can you play this game?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Outside, playground, parks</li> </ul> <p><b>When can you play this game?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recess, after school, summer vacation</li> </ul> <p><b>What equipment do you need?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 4 bases (or something that can act as a base), a kickball, flags (could use scarves or dishrags)</li> </ul> <p><b>Safety concerns:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• None</li> </ul> <p><b>Explain how to play the game:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Divide into 2 equal teams. Flip a coin to decide which team is up first and which is in the outfield.</li> <li>• All players wear flags at the waist. Hook them to your waist so that they can be pulled off fairly easily.</li> <li>• The outfield positions its players around the field and one person is the pitcher.</li> <li>• The pitcher rolls the ball to the first kicker. The kicker kicks the ball and all members of the team run to the bases while the outfield chases after them and tries to take their flags. One person in the outfield has to collect the ball and get it to home base. The objective is for the runners to get back to home base without having their flags taken or before the ball gets back to home. For each runner that makes it back to home base without getting her flag stolen, and before the ball gets back home, earns 1 point for the team.</li> <li>• If a person in the outfield catches the ball before it bounces the outfield earns 1 point.</li> <li>• Everyone on the team that is up gets a chance to kick the ball before switching and becoming the outfielders.</li> </ul>
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**Figure 1** — Completed game information sheet.

Games Too—*Las Niñas Pueden Jugar Tambien,*” and the girls from McAuliffe selected pink and entitled their book “Girly Girls *Can* Play Games.” We had the books printed and provided each girl with five copies and a bag that had all the equipment necessary to play each game. The book table of contents is presented in Figure 2.



<b>Table of Contents</b>	
Introduction	1
<b>Games created by girls at McAuliffe Elementary</b>	
“Rainy day game”: <i>Toss and Catch</i>	3
“No equipment day”: <i>The Name Game</i>	4
“No equipment day”: <i>Line Tag</i>	5
“We don’t want to mess up our hair and nails day”: <i>The Jumpband Game</i>	6
“Flip flops day”: <i>Beach Ball Pass</i>	7
“Nice clothes day”: <i>Spinning Names</i>	8
“I don’t want to sweat”: Beach Ball Name Game	9
<b>Games created by girls at Frida Kahlo Elementary</b>	
“Nice clothes day”: <i>Fair Ball—La Pelota Divertida</i>	10
“Flip flop day”: <i>Hot Kooshball</i>	11
“Don’t want to break a nail day”: <i>Color Tag Volleyball</i>	12
“Flip flop day”: <i>Group Juggling</i>	13
“Nice clothes day”: <i>Fun Ball on Mat—Pelota Divertida</i>	14
“No Equipment day”: <i>The Shark Game</i>	15
“Nice clothes day”: <i>Runaway Kickball</i>	16
“The boys won’t let us play day”: <i>High Five Tag—Encontados</i>	17
“Nice clothes day”: <i>Freeze Flag Tag</i>	18
“I don’t want to sweat”: <i>Freeze Dance</i>	19
“Nice clothes day”: <i>Scarf Ball Keep Away</i>	20
“Make up your own game”: Blank Form	21
Equipment List	22
Jump band instructions	22
<b>Source: Girls’ Book</b>	

**Figure 2** — Book table of contents.

## Discussion

For these girls, initially, their available physical activity spaces and opportunities were constricted because, in their view, they did not allow for them to be girly girl *and* physically active simultaneously. This partly resonates with a variety of physical education scholars who have noted girls’ participation in physical activity is often limited by perceived gender barriers (Azzarito, Solmon, & Harrison, 2006; Flintoff & Scraton, 2001; Wright, 1999). However, girly girl is not just about gender. Girly girl is also a language and embodiment that illuminates the intersection of gender discourse with Mexican culture and values (Anzaldúa, 2007; Cruz, 2006).

Anzaldúa (2007) writes that for a *mexicana* the “ultimate rebellion she can make against their native culture is through her sexual behavior” (p. 41). As a lesbian, she claims that for a *mexicana* to be anything but heterosexual places her at risk for “being abandoned by the mother, the culture, *la Raza*, for being unacceptable, faulty, damaged . . . totally rejected. . . . To avoid this rejection, some of us conform to the values of the culture” (Anzaldúa, 2007, p. 40–42).

Although the girls used the language of girly girl as a way of identifying barriers to their physical activity, their embodiment of girly girl resonates with heteronormative Mexican culture.

Rather than focus our attention on asking the girls to critique parts of Mexican culture that Anzaldúa (2007) claims injure women in the name of protecting them, our hope was to work with the girls in ways that focused on creating possibilities. When we began focusing on *what could be*, by acknowledging the girls’ desires to be girly girl, and invited them to create games that girly girls would enjoy playing, the barriers they identified were no longer the problem. Once the games became about enacting their subjectivities without outsiders’ (Anzaldúa, 2007; Hill-Collins, 1990) judgment, then not wanting to sweat or mess up their hair or nails really did not matter any more.

It was as if the moment we acknowledged their desire to be girly girl and worked *with* them to co-create games *for* them that the content of the games they created actually contradicted many of their self-identified girly girl barriers. That is, whereas they may have been making up games for days when they did not want to sweat or mess up their nice clothes, many of their actual games involved running, jumping, chasing, and fleeing—in other words, the possibility of sweating or getting their clothes dirty.

Through the process of making up and playing games, we noticed that the girls began to resist the idea that being girly girl meant that one cannot, or does not, desire being physically active. It was through the game creation process that the girls began to name and enact alternative possibilities for their physical activity participation.

Through practicing change, these girls re-inscribed discourses of race/gender/sexuality by creating a curriculum of possibilities that allowed them to be, feel, and become physically active. The games that the girls created with Kim allowed them to take ownership over their physical activity practices. It centered them as physically active through the games they created and played, and repositioned them as girls who were willing to possibly sweat, get dirty, and mess up their hair or break their nails. According to Davies (2000), this is agency.

Agency is never freedom from discursive constitution of self but the capacity to recognize that constitution and to resist, subvert, and change the discourses themselves through which one is being constituted. It is the freedom to recognize multiple readings such that no discursive practice, or positioning within it by powerful others, can capture being an individual standing outside social structure and process. (p. 67)

Had we pushed the girls to critique or resist being girly girl, we believe they would not have responded favorably because they showed no signs of not wanting to be girly girl. Further, such a move on our part may have positioned them as deviants within their culture. As Anzaldúa (2007) warns, “Chicano, *mexicano*, and

some Indian cultures have no tolerance for deviance. Deviance is whatever is condemned by the community” (p. 40).

When opportunities were presented in physical activity settings for the girls to be girly girl, it facilitated, rather than hindered, their physical activity participation. Thus, instead of being girls who “did not like PE” or “did not like physical activity,” these girls in fact did enjoy activity and noted that “girly girls can play games too.”

For girls who identify as girly girl to enjoy physical activity requires adults to look beyond typical views of what it means to be active (Wright, 1999). One way we might consider this is to focus more on child-designed games within the larger physical education curriculum. Child-designed games allow for teachers to be both culturally responsive and for girls and boys to have choice in how they structure their game play. They further allow children ways to meet their individual interests and needs (Wright, 1999) while still allowing teachers to teach standards-based physical education.

The girls we worked with created games that actually contradicted many of the kinds of games we find in traditional physical education and yet still held the important aspects of standards-based learning, such as vigorous physical activity and skill development. Further, their games reflected their values of physical activity through self-expression and social interaction (National Association of Sport and Physical Education, 2004). Finally, their games included everyone, the games were cooperative rather than competitive, and there was little risk of anyone getting hurt.

It may be that when girls are put into physical activities in which they are forced to abandon their cultural values and practices, are offered no choices, are forced to be competitive, are at risk for getting injured, or are denied an opportunity to participate they use wanting to be girly girl as an excuse for not playing. As Sunshine stated, “if I don’t like what we are doing in PE then I’m a girly girl.”

We need to continue activist research that focuses on different contexts and girls’ different self-identified barriers to physical activity. We know that it is in the particulars of any research context that we begin to see how people interpret and act on the meanings of their experiences. Thus, we see the value in having multiple studies around these topics so that teachers, teacher educators, and researchers might have more knowledge and insight on how to better work with girls to meet their individual activity needs.

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