



LANDSCAPES OF ACADEMIC SUCCESS

Smart Girls and School Culture

Rebecca Raby and Shauna Pomerantz

A powerful and popular argument has dominated discussions of young people's academic success for the last fifteen years: girls are thriving in school, while boys are trailing behind (see, for example, Pollack 1998; Kindlon and Thompson 2002; DiPrete and Buchmann 2013). This pattern is, in turn, interpreted as a sign that girls now live in a world in which gender inequality has disappeared or perhaps even been reversed. This narrative is part of a postfeminist, neoliberal context that denies structural gender inequalities that hinder girls. Instead, commensurate with a postfeminist, neoliberal sensibility, we see an overwhelming celebration of girls' individualized accomplishments alongside a failure to recognize any links between girls and gender oppression in the school and beyond (see Harris 2004; Gill and Scharff 2011; Pomerantz et al. 2013). Yet many studies have pointed to the ongoing difficulties that girls continue to face as they negotiate gender inequality (see Renold and Allan 2006; Pomerantz and Raby 2011; Francis, Skelton, and Read 2012; Pomerantz et al. 2013), particularly the intersections in girls' lives that hinder an exclusive concentration on gender (Harris 2004; Ringrose 2013).

Drawing on data collected from a three-year study, "Smart Girls: Negotiating Academic Success in a Post-feminist Era," our work enters into this critical conversation through interviews with girls about their experiences of academic success. The point of these conversations was to contextualize smart girlhood as a shifting and mediated subject position, and to challenge the postfeminist context in which girls are situated within some popular and academic accounts of gender and education. In talking with girls who self-identify as academically successful, we have learned that smart girlhood is not the individualized, depoliticized state suggested by postfeminist narratives, but is, rather, a complex, multifaceted subject position that is fraught with sexist interactions, stress management, and elaborate interplays between and among girls, peers, teachers, and the school (see Pomerantz and Raby

2011; Pomerantz et al. 2013; Ringrose 2013). This chapter focuses on how the school, as a discursive space, contributes to these negotiations as the landscape against which girls perform academic success. We argue that girls' engagement with their academic identities is complicated and/or enhanced by their school cultures. In keeping with our desire to contextualize the experiences of smart girls, this chapter thus specifically highlights academically successful girls' negotiation of the discursive space of the school, asking whether the climate of certain schools provides broader and better possibilities for the performance of gender, in turn allowing smart girls to thrive.

Discursive Space of Schooling

Many ethnographic studies have provided in-depth analyses of the intricacies of school spaces and how these are navigated by different students. For example, Dickar (2008) looks at the spatial organization of an inner-city school in New York with attention to how students from diverse backgrounds manage this space; Pomerantz (2008) examines diverse girls' performances of style within the multiple spaces of a Vancouver high school; Proweller (1998) considers the school as a dynamic space where girls negotiate classed, gendered, and racialized identities within their upper-middle-class girls' private school in New York State; and Yon's (2000) ethnographic exploration of a Toronto school illustrates how the school's historical and current cultural and racialized context reflects and shapes how culture and race unfold in students' lives. We know from such studies that schools, as geographically located institutions, have distinct cultures linked to their neighborhoods, size, history, academic and extracurricular programming, and so forth, all of which come together into particular stories about those schools. We also know that students within each school, while sharing in these school reputations and identities, experience their school in distinct ways, underscoring the shifting, unstable, discursive nature of culture.

We talked to girls across a number of schools within the same geographical area. In these conversations it became clear that there were some consistent and relevant narratives about the importance of certain school cultures, but that there were also multiple perspectives on each school's culture depending on where a girl was located socially, culturally, and academically. In short, school culture was never static. As Deborah Britzman notes, every telling of the school "is constrained, partial, and determined by the discourses and histories that prefigure, even as they might promise, representation" (2000: 32). In calling the

school a discursive space, we draw attention to the fact that school cultures are not trans-historical, existing external to the constituting effects of power, but are created by the contextualized stories that girls (and others) tell about what their school is like. As a result, schools are changing, discursive spaces wherein common stories come to be told, thus producing school culture, but that different girls also experience their schools—and thus academic success—in diverse ways. As Dan Yon notes, these multiple readings of schools encompass “various fragments of discourses” that must be juxtaposed rather than smoothed over in order to consider “how they might act upon the actor’s view of what is going on” (2000: 32).

Following Britzman, we thus set out to “acknowledge the differences within and among [girls’] stories of experiences” (2000: 32), rather than producing a seamless account of how the school affects girls’ negotiations of academic success. Methodologically, this means that we have focused on the similarities *and* differences within and among girls’ stories of smart girlhood in specific schools in order to continually remind ourselves and others that there is no one way for a girl to experience academic success, but also to identify some loose patterns that seem to either thwart or support smart girls in the school. Taking into account these multiple and intersecting landscapes of academic success, this chapter thus addresses the question: How is smart girlhood mediated by girls’ understanding of the discursive space of their schooling? Our analysis of girls’ interviews has produced four lenses through which to view the landscapes of academic success that girls traversed and negotiated daily: the limits of reputation, the impact of school culture, consistent challenges, and intersectionality. These lenses made up the backdrop of girls’ academic engagement, but how they played out was always contingent upon which girls we talked to.

Talking to Smart Girls

Our data arises from interviews conducted with fifty-one self-identified smart girls,¹ aged twelve to eighteen, living in the Niagara Region of Ontario, Canada. This part of Canada is located between Lake Ontario and Lake Erie and borders the United States. It has a high manufacturing base, although over the past twenty years this base has been shifting towards the service industry for employment, particularly through casinos, call centers, and associated tourism. It is also an agricultural region, showcasing viniculture. The Niagara Region is one of significant income disparity but limited racial diversity. People’s backgrounds are predominantly Italian-, French-, German-, and Anglo-Canadian. As

is the case across Ontario, this region supports two publicly funded school boards, one of which is Catholic.

We located research participants through local advertising and word-of-mouth. Smartness was primarily defined based on academics, in that we advertised that we were seeking “girls who do well in school, or could if they tried.”² In order to mitigate somewhat the hierarchy of the interviewer/interviewee dynamic, the participants could choose to be interviewed individually or paired with another smart girl. Twenty-three participants were interviewed individually, twelve accepted our invitation to be interviewed in pairs, and three girls were interviewed as a trio. All of our research participants were given the opportunity to participate in a follow-up interview and forty-four participants did so. Follow-up interviews provided us with an opportunity to probe more deeply into areas that were touched upon in the first interview, to ask whether the participants had any new reflections on their experiences after the initial interview, and to ask a new set of questions related to the media, role models, and identity.

Overall, the girls we spoke to came from sixteen different schools, including elementary, middle, and high schools, public and Catholic schools, and several private schools. This chapter focuses on four key high schools, all located within a small city in the Niagara Region. Academy House is an expensive private school with an international population and reputation for academics and athletics; Central Secondary is an inner-city school that one girl described as having a “ghetto” reputation; Blue Ridge is a public school with a French Immersion program and a strong reputation for academic excellence; and St. Mary’s High is a Catholic high school known for sports that has strong rivalry with Blue Ridge (see Table 4.1). These schools were chosen for discussion in this chapter because of their proximity to each other, distinct reputations, and the number of participants in our study who attended them.

Table 4.1. Focus Schools

School	Reputation	Participants
Academy House (AH)	Expensive co-educational private school internationally known for academics and athletics	4
Central Secondary (CS)	Inner-city school with a negative reputation, populated by diverse students	4
Blue Ridge High (BRH)	Public school with French Immersion, and a strong reputation for academic excellence	18
St. Mary’s High (SMH)	Catholic school rival to BRH with a reputation for academics and sports	6

Source: authors

For this chapter, we isolated data from girls who went to the above four schools and analyzed codes related to school reputation, school climate, dumbing down, popularity, pressures on girls, and intersecting identifications to isolate the themes that are developed below. Our data offers a powerful portrait of the impact of school culture on academic success; we have a diversity of girls' in-depth analyses of what it means to be smart both in their own schools and across a variety of schools. Our research is unique to the specific schools in this region of Southern Ontario, Canada, but it also resonates with prominent U.K. research on school cultures and academic achievement (for example, Renold and Allan 2006; Francis et al. 2012). Finally, since we do not draw on other information about these schools, such as how the schools promote or represent themselves or how they are defined by their administrations, our analysis is based solely on how the girls themselves understood and participated in creating the discursive spaces of their schools.

The Limits of Reputation

Schools have reputations based on their neighborhoods, histories, programming, and demographics (Yon 2000; Dickar 2008; Pomerantz 2008). In our interviews, the reputation of a school was powerful in that it often drew a student to that school (or did not)³ and affected how girls felt about themselves as students in a particular place. For example, for some girls, the positive reputation of their school was a key component in their overall satisfaction with their school. But reputation could also be used to rally against outsider interpretations, as was the case with Central Secondary. Seen as rough and situated in a "bad" neighborhood, Central had a reputation for poor teaching and students who were mediocre. For instance, Joanne (fifteen), who attended Blue Ridge High, suggested that Central is "the bottom" of the barrel in terms of supporting smart girls. Yet to the girls we talked to who were at Central, their school was accepting, nonconformist, and caring—an environment, they explained, that fostered a culture of trying hard and seeking out help when it was needed. They lauded their teachers and said that you could just be yourself rather than having to fit in with the popular girls, like at other schools. The underdog status of Central helped these smart girls to rally around their school's academic culture.⁴

Across the city, Academy House (AH) was known for granting its students an excellent education; as a private school, it was considered to offer an elite opportunity. Indeed, the school's website claims that 90 percent of students are university/college bound. Sarah (fifteen), who

had transferred to Academy from Blue Ridge, sacrificing French Immersion in order to pursue science, particularly appreciated her new school and felt that there was greater acceptance for being smart there than at Blue Ridge. Yet some other girls we spoke with contended that Academy was no better than public school, despite the cost. As Lisa (fifteen, AH) told us, “internally, they don’t support being smart as much as you would think. They advertise that they will prepare kids for college and get you in anywhere, but I think public schools do more.” Jordan (thirteen, AH), whose working-class family made economic sacrifices so that she could switch to Academy during the course of our research, also suggested that at Academy it was wise not to broadcast your academic success because popular girls teased others about being too smart and not pretty enough. The result of these mixed reports was that girls at Academy House sometimes felt a little bit cheated by the discrepancy between what others thought about their school and their own personal experiences. We will return to this point when we discuss class-based intersections.

Reputation clearly does not ensure an ideal setting for smart girls nor does it inherently prevent one. Rather, reputation seems firmly linked to class: the wealthy private school has a strong reputation, but not everyone is comfortable there and the effects of various hierarchies may be exacerbated. In contrast, the inner-city school, in a poorer catchment area of the city, has a weaker and potentially undeserved reputation.

School Culture Matters

While girls’ uneasiness with some school reputations indicate the multiple narrative fragments that define school spaces in terms of their hospitality to smart girls, in other schools there was a dominant, consistent narrative. This consistency was most notable when they talked about Blue Ridge High, which proved to be a very prominent school in our study, in marked contrast to how students talked about the rival Catholic school, St. Mary’s. The majority of our participants went to Blue Ridge—a school with special academic programming including French Immersion and a focus on sports that drew a middle- to upper-middle-class population. The number of our participants from Blue Ridge underscores that the school draws strong students, but it also supports the argument that the culture of the school supports, fosters, and validates girls’ smart identities, for it was primarily girls from Blue Ridge who had the necessary academic confidence and smart self-identity to be drawn to our study.

Participants mentioned the school's reputation in the city for being academic; they also talked about how its size, diverse population, wide selection of clubs, and sheer number of strong students made it a hospitable peer environment for smart girls. As Elizabeth (fourteen, BRH) noted about Blue Ridge, "I think [at] my school, [girls dumbing down] is not as much as the case as maybe somewhere else. It is a very academic school, so it's not a bad thing to be smart." Girls at Blue Ridge were less likely than those at other schools to discuss the importance of girls' good looks in relation to popularity, less likely to mention girls pretending to be unintelligent for the sake of getting boys to like them, and more likely to say that being smart is all good. As McLovin (fifteen, BRH) summarized, "[I]f you're smart, you're in. If you aren't as smart you are in the middle ... group because being smart represents your status in school. ... The guys always want the smart girls and looks are a bonus." Overall, for a number of girls, Blue Ridge was a very positive, supportive place to be.

In contrast to this encouraging culture, despite the reputation of Catholic schools in the region offering more rigorous education than non-Catholic schools, Blue Ridge's neighboring Catholic school, St. Mary's High (SMH) presented quite a different environment, and, likely as a result, far fewer students from this school participated in our research. Participating St. Mary's girls described their school as similarly academic, athletic, and drawing middle- to upper middle-class students, but they also talked about it as a party school. As Emma (fourteen, SMH) explained, "[G]irls, like, think it's better to blow it off and be popular and party and kick back and not do anything." The girls who went to this school were more likely to emphasize the importance of girls' looks over their academic talents, more likely to mention sexism in the school, and more likely to observe other girls "dumbing down," a pattern outlined in this exchange between friends Haley (fourteen) and Luna (fourteen), both at St. Mary's.

Haley: The girls that hang out with the hockey guys act dumb and I know they are smarter than that.

Luna: You can tell, sometimes they say their answers and it's really good. You know they are capable, but they are acting stupid.

Shauna: Why?

Haley: I think guys find it attractive.

While one respondent felt that St. Mary's was a "smart school," no one talked about how it was a refuge or haven for girls who are academically strong.

The pattern of Blue Ridge's being a more welcoming environment for smart girls brings us to the question of whether a broader capacity for gendered possibilities in a school allows for girls' smartness to thrive. In her study of masculinity in three distinct middle schools in the U.K., Emma Renold found that while hegemonic masculinity prevailed in all the schools, at one that emphasized academics over football, "the institutional production of discourses which made available 'softer' non-macho masculinities were more readily available" (2004: 257). Renold thus concludes that schools need to consider what kinds of masculinities and femininities are made available to students and to increase possibilities for non-hegemonic gender performance. Renold's argument is further supported by Francis et al. (2012), who agree that dominant forms of masculinity and femininity can conflict with academic achievement; schools with less dichotomized gender performances may allow students to more fully embrace academics. At Blue Ridge, it seemed that possibilities for performing smart girlhood were similarly more available to girls than they were at the more hierarchically gendered St. Mary's.

The girls we talked to also said that they valued the diversity of the school, the extent of its programming, and its size, feeling that each of these characteristics created an advantage. Research into school size has found that students in smaller schools have a greater sense of belonging, better attendance, fewer behavior problems, and are more involved in extracurricular activities, on average, than students in larger schools (Cotton 1996). Small school advocates thus argue that it is important for schools to remain small, yet our data suggests that a larger school, with the right programming options and a supportive culture, can provide a positive environment for academic success.

No Perfect Refuge

By contrasting these two neighboring schools we see that the discursive space of schooling is important to girls' academic self-identity and their ability to negotiate this identity successfully among peers. Some contexts are clearly more supportive than others. That said, in marked contrast to the celebratory narratives of girls' academic success that have dominated popular media, we did not find any perfect place for girls to perform academically successful identities. As we discuss elsewhere, postfeminist narratives of easy and uncomplicated smart girlhood are off the mark since they do not acknowledge the gendered culture of schooling and thus miss the powerful intersections between gender

and academic success (Raby and Pomerantz 2015). Girls had to be careful not to be considered too smart, for example. The girls who smoothly balanced their capacities in school with a social life had an easier time than those who were considered overly cocky with their academic success. As Darlene (fourteen, BRH), an athletic girl with a taste for more alternative clothing styles, observed, “I think if you are social and smart it helps a little more, rather than being a smart outcast.” Bella (fourteen, AH) also argued, “I don’t think the boys would consider you popular if you are so single-minded and focused on work. ... I think some guys would consider them undateable because they are boring.” Generally, it was good for a girl to play down her academic drive. Indeed, girls even pretended not to be smart. Some participants talked of dumbing themselves down, and many lamented that their peers were also doing so. While it was more common in some schools than others, respondents from every one of these four schools talked about girls dumbing down in order to be popular or to attract boys. This pattern suggests that sexism continues to thrive, despite many girls’ assertions of gender equality (Pomerantz et al. 2013).

Girls also needed the right look and dress. For instance, Bella reflected a strong pattern among respondents from Academy House when she said, “[P]eople are mean, like if [a girl] is not as pretty or is overweight or too thin ... it’s something to judge them on and make them not as popular.” Similarly, Agnes (fifteen, BRH) said, “[A] boy can get away with looking any way if he is funny or has a good personality whereas girls can’t.” As others have illustrated through similar studies, and reflective of current popular culture representations of smart girls, it is much easier to be a socially successful smart girl for those who are considered pretty and/or hot (Renold and Allan 2006; Skelton et al. 2010; Francis et al. 2012; Pomerantz and Raby 2015). Certainly some school climates seemed better for smart girls, but many girls across all four schools faced challenges if they were being overly studious and so were careful not to be too overt about their smartness, noticed girls dumbing down, and worried that looks were valued over intelligence.

Intersectionality

Critics of the successful girls versus failing boys discourse contend that these narratives fail to recognize how gender is importantly intersected by numerous other identifications linked to race, culture, class, religion, sexuality, and so forth (Harris 2004; Ringrose 2013). While there was some agreement among our participants as to how certain school

spaces supported or thwarted girls' academic success and patterns across many girls in terms of their need to downplay their smartness, there were still vast differences in how girls experienced their academic success based on their positioning as raced, classed, and social subjects in the school. While these intersections were not always experienced negatively, they deepen the story of smart girlhood by exemplifying the complicated landscapes of school environments for academic success. To illustrate such complicating intersections, the remaining discussion draws primarily on interviews with participants at Blue Ridge High.

Reflecting the geographical setting of this research, most of our participants were white, although nine had a cultural background that can be broadly categorized as South or East Asian,⁵ and one participant was black. A stereotype of the *smart Asian* prevails in the Niagara Region, as it does in much of North America, so we asked our participants whether there were stereotypes related to smart students and race/ethnicity at their school. These answers led to a centering of whiteness, which was in part accomplished through the reproduction of the stereotype of the *smart Asian*. For example, Jenny Po (fifteen, Chinese, BRH) told us, "[W]e are called 'the Asians,' because Asians are always smart." When we asked Lisa (sixteen, white, AH) to explain how race and academic success are connected, she confirmed this stereotype, saying, "I guess jokes, and categorizing people. Like saying 'the Asians are smart.' It's odd comments that are stupid and very generalized." Similarly, Chuchos Valdez (fifteen, white, BRH) noted, "I mean like Asians are seen as being more smart than others and it's not really true."

Like some of our participants, others have argued that this ongoing characterization of Asian students problematically homogenizes students of diverse backgrounds and abilities (Lee 2009). For example, teachers may neglect to help students from Asian backgrounds who need support because they are assumed to be thriving (Conchas and Pérez 2003). Lee (2009) similarly found that some less academically successful Asian students in her study were silenced by the stereotype of the *smart Asian* and less likely to ask for or gain the assistance they needed. For more successful students, teachers' high expectations can generate a great deal of stress (Conchas and Pérez 2003).

Lee (2009) also contends that the associated link between Asian smarts and the categorization of Asian people as the model minority in North America implicitly denies experiences of racism. Matthews more directly identifies the *smart Asian* stereotype with new racism or culturalism, which attributes homogeneous cultural features to a group: "[these stereotypes] are not just lies or false representations of reality, but signs, images and meanings that seek to fix or arrest representa-

tion" (2002: 194). Matthews, like Lee, cautions against the breadth of categorizing embedded in the word *Asian*. Further, Matthews reminds us that a pro-school stereotype does not mean that students no longer experience discrimination associated with academic success and notes Anglo-American students taunting Asian students, as, for example, dorky or teacher's pets.

While a discourse of multiculturalism and a belief that there was no racism permeated our interviews, the *smart Asian* stereotype clearly emerged as salient, adding a complicating intersection to gendered academic success. This was particularly the case for the East and South Asian girls we interviewed. Joanne (fourteen, BRH) identified herself as second-generation Korean-Canadian. She told us that she was known for being smart because she is Asian, even though she struggled in math: "they think I'm a genius and ask me for help and to give them answers and whatnot." Her white friend and co-interviewee, Sully (fourteen, BRH), added, "[I]n math class, everyone is like, oh, just ask the Asian!" A fewer number of East and South Asian girls talked about how such assumptions could support them in their smart identities, despite their homogenizing effects and culturalism. Jenny Po, for instance, felt that her hard work in school was in part linked to her Chinese background. She felt that she was stereotyped because of her Chinese background, but when asked whether this bothered her she said, "[N]o, because it's usually good, like, [being] smart. Or I can play a lot of music. This one time I did a chin-up in gym class this girl was like '[W]hoah she's smart and strong!' One of those."

Race and culture complicated smart students' experiences of Blue Ridge High in other ways. In another example, Ella (twelve, white, BRH), who skipped a year and was extremely involved in extracurricular activities, sympathetically talked about how her brother prefers to hang out with students from Central Secondary, even though he goes to Blue Ridge: "He hangs out with, like, a group of immigrants, like he says that he wants to go to Central Secondary and stuff sometimes, because [at Blue Ridge] there is just only white people and they are all rich and they like they gossip and stuff. ... Yeah, and everyone is like rich and well off and at Central everyone has a harder life and like they all have been through the stuff." Ella's discussion of culture, immigration, and class was unusually frank and illustrates how, for academically successful boys as well as girls, other intersecting identifications are not necessarily nurtured in a school reputed to have academic excellence, which commonly overlaps with schools serving predominantly middle- to upper-middle class students. We see this also in examples from girls regarding their experiences of class difference.

Jordan's mixed experiences of her class-based location in Academic House indicate that academic success is not enough to feel that one belongs. In Proweller's ethnography of a private girls' school in New York state, she draws on the postcolonial concept of borderland to discuss middle-class academic girls who are negotiating an upper-middle-class elite school. Proweller is interested in "understanding the complexities of identity formation for those historically located at the cultural center who are also actively repositioning themselves in relation to others inside and outside cultural privilege" (1998: 237). Jordan's working-middle-class and popular girl background shaped her negotiation of Academy and its peer culture, suggesting that she was developing her school-based identity through a borderland position. While in her previous school she had been one of the top girls in terms of popularity, with her move to Academy she lost her previous friends and now had "a more secluded," smaller group with the members of which she really talked. Many of the students had a preppier look, but she preferred jeans and a T-shirt. When people in the community asked what school she went to, she was uncomfortable with their assumptions that she came from wealth and emphasized that she was helped by having been awarded a scholarship. She was also finding that while some students at Academy were very focused academically like her, others were "forced to be there by their parents" and seemed spoiled; this complicated her high expectations about Academy students.

Other girls problematically naturalized links between school success and class, as we saw in this exchange in the follow-up interview with Sara and Basil (BRH):

I: So are rich kids also known as smart kids?

Sara: Maybe when parents are higher educated they expect more.

Basil: Usually higher class parents, it's like if you don't get a high mark it's not acceptable. They expect a lot. There's a possibility it's genetic too.

Girls sometimes associated their own ease in negotiating school with parental support well grounded in class-based privilege. When we were talking with Carmel and McLovin (BRH), for example, McLovin similarly linked her parents' support with class, privilege, and school success: "I want to go to university but they are paying for it so that's my support ... Moral support, yeah my parents are good, they always told us homework first and we grew up with that. When it comes to math my dad just kind of teaches me because he used to be a professor so I don't know, that's good." McLovin also signaled class through reference to brand names, a pattern Proweller (1998) notes in her ethnog-

raphy. Proweller found that brand names acted as a sorting mechanism for class, although for her, discussions of brand names involved an indirect critique of upper-middle-class girls' privilege, entitlement, and exclusions. In contrast, McLovin noted how buying power is linked to the social success of certain smart girls: "[I]f people walk around in school clothing that sets them apart, it's definitely the cool people. If you see people walking around with school sweaters and track pants and bandanas it's like that person's cool because they can afford to wear our clothes." These kinds of patterns were difficult for Flowerpower (seventeen, BRH). When asked if the high achieving girls in her school worked at part-time jobs, she responded, not without anger, "I would say that the majority of them—not all—are privileged. They are the ones that have their own car that they drive to school everyday ... There are people who have never worked before." For Flowerpower, being smart was much easier for girls with money. While she lived on her own, battled depression, and tried to engage in an activist life, her counterparts appeared to be gliding through high school without much sweat, effort, or even notice.

Through the above interview fragments we thus see how class differences contribute to some girls' difficult negotiation of schools that are intended to provide a rigorous education, but also how other girls draw on dominant discourses of support, reputation, and aspiration to normalize class differences and inequalities.

Finally, there was a related connection between smart girls' social status and their experiences of academic success. It has been contended that popular, normative girlhood does not smoothly resonate with academic achievement. Skelton et al.'s review of various related studies found that passivity and accommodation linked to femininity clash with academic demands of "hard-nosed determination, singularity and concern with mental/intellectual (rather than social) pursuits" (2010: 187). Their own research supported this tension since twelve- to thirteen-year-old "clever" girls found it difficult to balance normative girlhood with school success. Renold and Allan (2006) and Francis (2009) also found that smart girls continue to face challenges in the social world of the school.

Some girls are better able than others to balance out their smartness through attention to social engagements, style, and good looks (Skelton et al. 2010; Francis et al. 2012; Raby and Pomerantz 2015). At Blue Ridge High, where McLovin, who was athletic, dating, and popular, had said that "it is cool to be smart," Virginia (sixteen) defined herself as not very popular and provided a starkly different assessment of the school's social climate. Virginia was from an upper-middle-class family

that stressed educational success, and she also has an exceptionally smart older sister. Of the two sisters, Virginia was considered the outgoing one, and, for her, popularity was a valuable but elusive goal, particularly at the time of her first interview. She lamented that her experience was that being smart and popular are mutually exclusive, even at BRH: “I have friends who only text me about what’s for homework and stuff. ... If I try to go hang out with these blondes that are super popular, they won’t accept me because they know I’m smart.” While McLovin easily combined her smartness with social success, for Virginia—of the same age and at the same school—this was much more difficult. Her reference to the super popular “blondes” remind us of the continuing importance of emphasized femininity for girls, and her dichotomizing of smart and popular resonates with the abovementioned pattern of girls dumbing down in order to be popular.

These three illustrations indicate how intersectionality complicates smart girlhood and shows that school culture continually shifts depending on the girls with whom one talks. While Blue Ridge was seen as accepting and fostering of smart girlhood, some of the girls we have quoted above certainly experienced their smart girlhood very differently. Intersections of race, class, and sociality mattered in powerful ways.

Conclusion

The discursive culture of a school can shape girls’ experiences of what it means to be a smart girl, although there is no perfect refuge for smart girls, and girls’ negotiation of school is importantly intersected by such factors as race, class, and popular femininity. There are a number of conclusions that we can draw from this complexity of smart girls’ experiences of the discursive space of schooling. First, as other researchers such as Ringrose (2013), Francis et al. (2012), and Renold and Allan (2006) have also contended, our findings belie the postfeminist narrative of girls’ academic achievement that have been reproduced both popularly (see, for example, Sommers 2000; Abraham 2010) and academically (Pollack 1998; Kindlon and Thompson 2002; see also Ringrose 2007). Our findings illustrate that smart girls are not thriving everywhere, and even in the more ideal spaces, some smart girls thrive more than others. The ubiquitous stories of girls dumbing down most powerfully indicate ongoing gender inequalities that smart girls navigate. Second, school reputations are largely grounded in class assumptions and do not necessarily define a school culture or suggest what smart girls’ experiences will be. Blue Ridge had a reputation for

academic success and many girls were thriving there, but for the other three schools in our study, the reputation of the school did not directly echo girls' experiences. Third, and related to the first two points, difference, inequality, and stigma linked to identifications around race, class, and gender continue to complicate smart girls' experiences in ways that have been established elsewhere (Harris 2004; Ringrose 2013), that we are exploring in the local context of our own research, and that are obfuscated by popular postfeminist narratives of girls' academic success. Finally, despite ongoing inequalities and the complications of intersecting identities, landscapes of academic success matter. To most of the girls at Blue Ridge High, for instance, they really mattered, offering possibilities to thrive both academically and socially that did not seem available elsewhere. But even for these girls, there is no easy recipe for a smooth, smart girlhood.

Rebecca Raby is a Professor of Child and Youth Studies in the Faculty of Social Sciences at Brock University. Her research draws on poststructural and critical theories to examine shifting constructions of childhood and adolescence, how they are experienced, and how they are intersected by gender, race, class, and sexuality. She is the author of *School Rules: Obedience, Discipline and Elusive Democracy* (2012) and co-editor of *Power and Everyday Practices* (2012). Based on their recently completed SSHRC-funded research, she and Shauna Pomerantz are currently writing *Smart Girls: Academic Success in a Post-Feminist Era*.

Shauna Pomerantz is Associate Professor in the Department of Child and Youth Studies at Brock University. Her research engages theoretical questions of subjectivity, ontology, and epistemology through the enmeshed theoretical lenses of feminist post-structuralism and new materialisms. She has published articles and book chapters on constructions of girlhood, dress codes, girls' style as identity practice, skater girls, computer girls, popular girls, and smart girls. She is the author of *Girls, Style, and School Identities: Dressing the Part* (2008), co-author of *'Girl Power': Girls Reinventing Girlhood* (2009), and is currently co-authoring a book (with Rebecca Raby) on girls, academic success, and the post-feminist condition.

Notes

1. We refer to all participants by their self-selected pseudonyms.

2. A section of the interviews also included discussion of many kinds of smartness, but the primary focus was on academic achievement.
3. Public school students in this region are expected to go to the school within their catchment area, but there are various ways in which students still have choice. For example, they can choose between Catholic and non-Catholic boards, and can apply for special programming like music or French.
4. It is noteworthy that in pilot focus groups three years earlier one respondent reported the opposite: at Central Secondary she felt she was “hated on” for being smart, and eventually she changed schools. This points to how experiences of schools can vary significantly among individuals and across time (Pomerantz and Raby 2011).
5. The background of two girls was Sri Lankan, three Chinese, one East Indian, one Filipina, one Korean, and one Cambodian/Laotian.

References

- Abraham, Carolyn. 2010. “Part 1: Failing Boys and the Powder Keg of Sexual Politic.” *The Globe and Mail*, in *National: Our Time to Lead*, 15 October. <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/time-to-lead/part-1-failing-boys-and-the-powder-keg-of-sexual-politics/article4081751/?page=all>.
- Britzman, Deborah P. 2000. “‘The Question of Belief’: Writing Poststructural Ethnography.” In *Working the Ruins: Feminist Poststructural Theory and Methods in Education*, ed. Elizabeth A. St. Pierre and Wanda S. Pillow, 27–40. New York: Routledge.
- Conchas, Gilberto Q., and Cristina C. Perez. 2003. “Surfing the ‘Model Minority’ Wave of Success: How the School Context Shapes Distinct Experiences among Vietnamese Youth.” *New Directions for Youth Development* 100 (Winter): 41–56.
- Cotton, Kathleen. 1996. “Affective and Social Benefits of Small-Scale Schooling.” *ERIC Digest*, ED401088. Charleston, WV: ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools. <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED401088.pdf>.
- Dickar, Maryann. 2008. *Corridor Cultures: Mapping Student Resistance at an Urban High School*. New York: New York University Press.
- DiPrete, Thomas A., and Claudia Buchmann. 2013. *The Rise of Women: The Growing Gender Gap in Education and What It Means for American Schools*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Francis, Becky. 2009. “The Role of the Boffin as Abject Other in Gendered Performances of School Achievement.” *The Sociological Review* 57, no. 4 (November): 645–669.
- Francis, Becky, Christine Skelton, and Barbara Read. 2012. *The Identities and Practices of High Achieving Pupils: Negotiating Achievement and Peer Cultures*. London: Continuum.
- Gill, Rosalind, and Christina Scharff, eds. 2011. *New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism, and Subjectivity*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

- Harris, Anita. 2004. *Future Girl: Young Women in the Twenty-First Century*. New York: Routledge.
- Kindlon, Dan, and Michael Thompson. 2002. "Thorns among Roses: The Struggle of Young Boys in Early Education." In *The Jossey-Bass Reader on Gender in Education*, 153–181. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Lee, Stacey J. 2009. *Unraveling the "Model Minority" Stereotype: Listening to Asian American Youth*, 2nd ed.. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Matthews, Julie. 2002. "Racialised Schooling, 'Ethnic Success' and Asian-Australian Students." *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 23, no. 2: 193–207.
- Pollack, William S. 1998. *Real Boys: Rescuing our Sons from the Myths of Boyhood*, 1st ed.. New York: Random House.
- Pomerantz, Shauna. 2008. *Girls, Style and School Identities: Dressing the Part*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Pomerantz, Shauna, and Rebecca Raby. 2011. "'Oh, She's So Smart': Girls' Complex Engagements with Post/Feminist Narratives of Academic Success." *Gender and Education* 23, no. 5: 549–564.
- Pomerantz, Shauna, and Rebecca Raby. 2015. "Reading Smart Girls: Post-nerds in Post-feminist Popular Culture." In *Girls, Texts, Cultures*, ed. Clare Bradford and Mavis Reimer. Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press.
- Pomerantz, Shauna, Rebecca Raby, and Andrea Stefanik. 2013. "Girls Run the World? Caught Between Sexism and Postfeminism in the School." *Gender and Society* 27, no. 2 (April): 185–207.
- Proweller, Amira. 1998. *Constructing Female Identities: Meaning Making in an Upper Middle Class Youth Culture*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Raby, Rebecca, and Shauna Pomerantz. 2015. "Playing it Down/Playing it Up: Girls' Strategic Negotiations of Academic Success," *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 36, no.4: 507–525. doi: 10.1080/01425692.2013.836056.
- Renold, Emma. 2004. "'Other' Boys: Negotiating Non-hegemonic Masculinities in the Primary School." *Gender and Education* 16, no. 2: 247–266.
- Renold, Emma, and Alexandra Allan. 2006. "Bright and Beautiful: High-achieving Girls, Ambivalent Femininities, and the Feminization of Success." *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 27, no. 4: 457–473.
- Ringrose, Jessica. 2013. *Postfeminist Education? Girls and the Sexual Politics of Schooling*. London: Routledge.
- . 2007. "Successful Girls? Complicating Post-feminist, Neoliberal Discourses of Educational Achievement and Gender Equality." *Gender and Education* 19, no. 4: 471–489.
- Skelton, Christine, Becky Francis, and Barbara Read. 2010. "Brains before 'Beauty'? High Achieving Girls, School and Gender Identities." *Educational Studies* 36, no. 2: 185–194.
- Sommers, Christina Hoff. 2000. *The War Against Boys: How Misguided Feminism Is Harming Our Young Men*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Yon, Daniel A. 2000. *Elusive Culture: Schooling, Race and Identity in Global Times*. Albany: State University of New York Press.