"If teachers are good to you": Caring for Rural Girls in the Classroom

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This article explores eight rural middle-school girls' perceptions of connections with their teachers. It rests on the finding that teachers offer a vital source of support for adolescent girls living in rural communities as girls come to a critical juncture in the development of their identities. Drawing on ethnographic and narrative data, I discuss the way in which rumors and reputations, gendered expectations, and miscommunications complicate the development of strong ties between the middle-school girls and their teachers, leaving the girls wishing for greater support at school. I provide a narrative example of one teachers' care for a student, and I offer suggestions for supporting rural adolescent girls' healthy identity development in school.

By the middle of March, students in some parts of the country are cracking open windows and catching the scent of warm spring air. But here in New Hampshire, snow squalls still swirl down from the mountains. Huddled in a middle school library, I am interviewing a group of rural eighth-grade girls to learn more about how their experiences in school shape how the girls see themselves. Fourteen-year-old Cassandra, a strident student, starts off our conversation, narrating a story about a time when she believed a teacher reprimanded her unfairly. What surprises me about Cassandra's story is not that she was scolded, but how deeply Cassandra was hurt by this exchange. Underneath Cassandra's tough exterior is a girl who wants to be known and valued. When I ask Cassandra and her peers if they have advice for their teachers, Cassandra is quick to respond: "If teachers are good to you, then you'll know adults are good, and you'll want to be good." This reveals how she believes care from her teachers shapes her developing sense of self.

Later in the week, I speak with a second group of girls in the same school. Callie, a quiet and hard-working student, opens up in the context of the interview. Despite her interest in learning, Callie dreads coming to school where she feels isolated and shunned. "Teachers should be more like parents," Callie starts, and then revises her statement. "Well, they're not the same thing. They're different. But parents care about you. Teachers should care about you." In calling for her teachers to be "more like parents," Callie stumbles over an absence of words to describe her relationships with teachers and what she hopes for in these connections, as the language of care seems somehow removed from the discourse of schooling.

This article describes my experiences observing and listening to eight middle-school girls from the rural community of Fairfield, New Hampshire, over the course of one school year. What I came to realize in my observations of and interactions with the girls was their unequivocal call for care from the adults in their school. As girls move through adolescence, the contexts in which they begin to craft a sense of self are paramount in shaping their adult identities. In this way, the time girls spend at school is critical in their construction of a sense of self (Nakkula, 2003). For adolescent girls growing up in rural communities—who may face inadequate social and capital resources, restricted opportunities for social connections, and limited adult role models—connections with teachers play a central role in girls' self-understanding.

Purpose

I sought to understand one group of rural girls' descriptions of how confiding relationships with teachers influenced their developing identities. Learning about rural girls' supportive relationships with teachers, the ways these connections formed (by chance or by design), and the times when the girls wish for greater support from teachers is critical to opening a conversation about how educators can strengthen rural girls' psychological well-being. Because I wanted to focus on the girls' own ability to make meaning of their lives, I used a qualitative approach, blending ethnographic and narrative methods as I listened to the girls speak about their lived experiences. How care between teachers and girls is communicated, interpreted, solicited, and experienced is a complicated process. The girls at Fairfield School spoke openly about the ways in which rumors and reputations, gendered expectations, and miscommunications prevented them from seeking out support from their teachers. The girls also pointed to teachers who were able to effectively communicate a sense of care, and in doing so opened a path for connections to develop.

I begin by reviewing the literature on the importance of adolescent girls' supportive connections with adults, and I then examine barriers to caring for rural girls in schools. Finally, I offer recommendations for how educators might offer support to rural girls in school. In keeping with ethnographic and narrative practice (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, 2005; Maxwell, 2004; May, 2002; Miles & Huberman, 1984; Schostak, 2006), I explore a limited group of rural girls' lives in depth. While this study does not presume to represent all rural girls, I believe there is value in the broader questions, concerns, and lessons that arise when these particular girls' stories are taken seriously as rich and meaningful accounts of rural adolescent girls' experiences in school.

Gender, Development, and Rural Youth

Theories of development have consistently pointed to adolescence as a critical time in the construction of a healthy identity (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Elliott & Feldman, 1993; Erikson, 1968; Nakkula, 2003; Marcia, 1980). During this period, adolescents develop the ability to think abstractly about their place in the world and evaluate their capacity to become efficacious young adults. Thus, adolescence represents a critical juncture in which one first begins to negotiate the intersection of one's own self, beliefs, values, worth, and potential in a particular society and culture.

Research on child development has long upheld the significance of supportive relationships in children's lives, especially as young people pass through adolescence (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Garmezy & Rutter, 1983; Nakkula & Ravitch, 1998; Spencer, 2000; Ward, 2000; Werner & Smith, 1982, 1992). Healthy connections with adults can provide adolescents with the tools to become engaged students and empowered citizens, encouragement and advice in the face of adversity, the foundations needed to craft a sense of self-esteem, a space in which youth can try out new ideas, and assistance in planning for the future (Erikson, 1968; Nakkula, 2003; Spencer, 2000). For girls in particular, connections with adults are paramount in establishing a strong sense of self (Brown, 1998; Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Spencer, 2000; Fine, 1988; Gilligan, 1997; Gilligan, Lyons, & Hanmer, 1990, 1991; Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver, & Surrey, 1991; Oliver & Lalik, 2000; Ward, 2000).

Yet for rural girls, supportive connections with adults can be made tenuous due to factors that complicate girls' ability to solicit and receive help and encouragement. Geographic and economic barriers can impede rural girls' access to social services and health care (Brown, 1998; Kelleher, Taylor, & Rickert, 1992; Petti & Levinson, 1986; San Antonio, 2004). Likewise, rural girls may also fear the stigma of asking directly for help in communities where girls feel they have little privacy (Brown, 1998; Casey, 2001; Hedlund, 1993; Hedlund & Hine, 1995; Hillier & Harrison, 1999). Feelings of isolation cultivated in rural communities, coupled with a fierce sense of independence and tenacity, may also prevent girls from seeking out support directly (Glendinning, Nuttal, Hendry, Kloep, & Wood, 2003; Jamieson, 2000; Ní Laoire, 1999, 2000). In extreme cases, threats of violence may also inhibit rural girls' ability to sustain strong connections with adults (Buckley, Storino, & Sebastiani, 2003; Singer et al., 1999; Slovak & Singer, 2002).

Given these challenges, teachers may represent the most important and consistent adults in rural youths' lives. Yet, in the politically charged climate of No Child Left Behind, the public attention given to rural schools often focuses on deficits in funding, raising test scores, and the paucity of qualified teachers (Casey, 2001; Sanchez, 2006). In the wake of such quantitative evaluations of rural schools, the quality of interactions between students and teachers has slipped out of focus, despite the fact that it is the day-to-day exchanges with their teachers that the rural girls in my study described as most transformative. Such connections in schools arguably shape the girls' feelings about themselves, their sense of hope, their future educational paths, and their successes in the classroom. Given their daily contact with students, adults working in rural schools may find that they have a predominant role in rural girls' lives and, in this position, can offer support at a critical juncture.

Research Questions

Two key questions guided my investigation. First, what stories do rural adolescent girls narrate about finding psychological help and support for their developing sense of self? Second, where do rural girls wish for greater support in school?

Both questions carry the assumption that confiding relationships with adults are vital to adolescents' healthy development (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Garmezy & Rutter, 1983; Spencer, 2000; Ward, 2000; Werner & Smith, 1982). I wanted to know how rural adolescent girls seek out, recognize, and respond to such assistance. Similarly, I was curious as to what stories rural girls might tell about not finding support, and where they described hope for greater support. Such stories provide valuable information as to how adults in rural girls' lives might offer greater assistance and foster girls' healthy psychological development.

Methods

An Introduction to Fairfield, New Hampshire

Located in the south central region of New Hampshire, Fairfield's population is just under 4,000 (New Hampshire Economic and Labor Market Information Bureau, 2004). While the town's residents are primarily white, in line with current demographic trends in southern New Hampshire, Fairfield's population is becoming increasingly diverse (San Antonio, 2004). Despite the rich natural beauty of Fairfield's rolling hills and quaint pastoral New England setting, Fairfield represents one of the poorest communities in rural New Hampshire, suffering from the same economic binds that many rural communities face. A century ago, the river coursing through Fairfield made the town an ideal host to thriving tanning, textile, and lumber industries. However, with the fall of such industrial prospects and a fire that destroyed the town's tannery, Fairfield's mills sit idle. Now, Fairfield's downtown boasts only the bones of its once prosperous past beneath layers of peeling paint and washed out store fronts. There is an ice cream store, a diner, drug store, and a pizza place. With a median family income approximately 25% below the state average of $55,633, many Fairfield residents face strained economic circumstances. While communities closer to Lake Winnipesaukee benefit from the booming tourist industry in the summer and fall, Fairfield lacks such resources. Opportunities for work in Fairfield are severely limited, and educational resources are similarly stressed.

Education in Fairfield and Fairfield School

Fairfield School sits at the base of one hill and overlooks another knoll, where Fairfield Elementary is located. Built into the hilly terrain just south of the White Mountains, the Fairfield School houses approximately 250 students in grades seven through twelve. Seventh and eighth graders attend all their classes in the school's ground floor and, in this way, are separated from their older peers. The school is a new brick building, renovated after Fairfield School District was awarded a settlement in a class-action lawsuit against the state of New Hampshire on the grounds of discriminatory practices in state education funding (Supreme Court of New Hampshire, 1997). Because of the small size of the school, teachers and administrators are likely to know each student personally. Further, information about a student's family background, educational record, and reputation easily passes throughout the school community.

Attitudes toward education in this rural community are shifting. Currently, approximately one third of the adults in Fairfield have earned a high school diploma and fewer than 10% of the town's residents have continued on to earn a bachelor's degree. However, teachers and administrators at Fairfield School have been advocating for the value of education in their students' lives. A decade ago, the ceremony at the end of eighth grade was entitled "Graduation," as many students did not continue on to high school. Now the Fairfield School faculty makes a special point of labeling this ceremony "Eighth Grade Promotion"—the name change signaling the importance of eighth grade as a transition to high school rather than an end in itself. Students and parents are now encouraged to plan for college, starting at the middle school level.

Designing a Study to Reach Rural Girls

I realize that entering Fairfield School as an outsider could make it difficult for me to hear and interpret rural girls' stories. While my background as a white woman who has lived and worked in rural communities gave me a place to begin to connect with the students and teachers I met in Fairfield, my opportunities in education set me apart from many of the community members. I was acutely aware of the ways in which rural girls are often silenced or rendered invisible by academic research in particular (Brown, 1998; Casey, 2001; Dodson, 1999), and I worried how my representation as an academic from an Ivy League university might hinder my ability to make authentic connections with the students. The claim that an outsider lacks an understanding of the social context is a serious one and deserves consideration. However, alternative ethnographic studies suggest that the perspective brought to an insular community by an outsider can illuminate experiences and interactions easily taken for granted by members of the community (Casey, 2001; Luttrell, 2003; Stack, 1974). Both approaches present risks and opportunities for gaining knowledge and understanding in ethnographic research.

Ethnographic researchers believe that building relationships with participants across differences can enable researchers to develop stronger analyses of their data (Behar, 1997; Delpit, 1995; Gilligan & Spencer, 2003; Luttrell, 2003; Reason, 1994; Stack, 1974). For example, connections can establish trust between a researcher and a participant, enhance knowledge of implied meanings in narratives or interactions, allow for participants to more readily disclose

intimate information, and enable researchers to better grasp the complexity of social dynamics. For these reasons, I started my research with an ethnographic study and began interviewing only after deepening my relationships within the Fairfield community.

Ethnographic Study

Ethnography, as Luttrell (2000) explains, offers a method for researchers to "listen and represent those we study on and in their own terms" (p. 499). I began my study at the end of September 2004 and visited Fairfield School two or three days a week throughout the remainder of the school year (my schedule depended upon passable road conditions during the snowy winter months). During the first six months, I immersed myself in the community as a participant observer. I observed the entire eighth grade class at Fairfield School throughout their school day, shadowing students throughout their classes, free periods, specials, lunch time, recess, and club meetings. I sat in on the middle school faculty's daily meetings, spoke with individual teachers at the end of the school day, and participated in conversations with teachers through email. I also kept in contact with the school principal through face-to-face meetings and email messages. I was able to visit a local social service program serving the Fairfield community. Meeting with the directors of this program offered me another perspective on the challenges Fairfield youth faced and the availability of supportive relationships with adults. This intensive strategy for collecting data enabled me to form relationships with the girls as well as develop a deep appreciation for the girls' own understandings of their identity and relationships within the context of their school community.

Analysis of Ethnographic Data

I took detailed fieldnotes throughout this initial phase of my study. After every visit to Fairfield School, I used my fieldnotes to write a narrative summary of my observations. Writing narrative summaries offered me a space in which I documented what I had seen, drew parallels to existing theories, wrote reflexively about my role as a participant observer, recorded my emotional responses to my fieldwork, and reflected on the shifting nature of my questions and findings. Recent writings about the role of the ethnographer highlight the importance of documenting the researcher's role and emotional engagement as essential in generating compelling research and documenting a reflexive practice (Behar, 1997; Denzin, 1989; Kleinman & Copp, 1993; Luttrell, 2003; Riessman, 2002). Using my fieldnotes and narrative summaries, I coded my ethnographic data by writing a set of memos (Chambers, 2000; Huberman & Miles, 2002; Luttrell, 2000; Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Tedlock, 2000) identifying pertinent themes within and across all the eighth

grade girls' narratives about their relationships with adults in their school community. My ethnographic research and writing enabled me to craft meaningful questions for the second layer of my analysis: narrative interviewing.

Narrative Interviewing

Inviting rural girls to speak about their lives as authorities of their own stories offers them a sense of empowerment. As Atkinson (1998) describes in his writing about life stories, "If we want to know the unique experience and perspective of an individual, there is no better way to get this than in the person's own voice" (p. 5). Likewise, recurring themes in my theoretical research and ethnographic data of rural girls' experiences of conflicts between voice and silence, power and agency, speaking and listening, demanded that I make space in my study to hear girls speak directly about their experiences. Following my ethnographic research with a narrative approach (Bruchac, 1997; Bruner, 1987; Coles, 1989; Gergen & Gergen, 1986, 1988; Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998; Riessman, 1993; Rosenwald & Ochberg, 1992) provided interested girls the opportunity to speak out against powerful misconstructions of rural youth that surround them and to develop a sense of agency in giving voice to the stories that have shaped their sense of self in relationships.

Initially, I had planned to structure my data collection to meet with each participant for a series of three individual interviews lasting approximately 30-40 minutes. However, after I interviewed seven of the eight girls individually, I discovered that I needed to restructure my expectations for interviews. What I had not anticipated was the girls' unanimous request to interview with a friend or group of peers. In a school where students were easily isolated due to the limited student body, I made the decision to honor the girls' request to interview with their peers. Undoubtedly, interviewing the girls in groups altered the shape of their narratives. While interviewing a group of students favors the collective voice over that of the individual, Madriz (2003) argues that interviewing groups of participants can shift the balance of power away from the researcher, and, in doing so, open the possibility for participants to speak more candidly and with greater authority about their own experiences. This method serves an underrepresented and stigmatized population—like rural adolescent girls—well. Similarly, in a small community where relationships and stories inevitably intersect, communal story-building is an unavoidable aspect of rural life and offers a natural context for the girls' narratives. I followed both semi-structured (Rubin & Rubin, 2004) and narrative approaches (Wengraf, 2001), asking participants a series of questions to elicit their stories and guide the direction of the interview.

I interviewed each girl at least three times. Some of the girls appeared in more than three interviews as they re-

quested interviews with different friends. Interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes. I meet with the groups of girls in the school library conference room. Although the girls and I could look out into the library and were visible to students nearby, our conversations were never interrupted. Using my laptop, I made a digital recording of each interview.

Analysis of Narrative Data

Narrative analysis treats personal stories as meaningful accounts of lived experience and attends to the particular structure, themes, and language a storyteller employs (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994; Coles, 1989; Gergen & Gergen, 1988; Labov, 1982, 1982; Labov & Waletzky, 1967; Lieblich et al., 1998; Riessman, 1993; Rogers et al., 1999). My first step in analyzing the narratives generated from my interview data was to transcribe the interview recordings following each interview. I then reread the transcripts and marked passages relevant to girls' identity development and supportive relationships. I organized these narrative passages by theme (Brown et al., 1988; Rogers et al., 1999) and wrote detailed memos (Richardson, 2003) about individual narratives and overlapping themes across narratives.

Portraiture

As a final layer of analysis, I used both my ethnographic and narrative memos to craft portraits of each of the eight girls. Using the metaphor of visual portraiture, Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) argue that rich narratives in social science research can capture complex images of participants. This form of analysis places emphasis on presenting a whole picture. Here, the background behind the image (the culture in which an individual is embedded) and the researcher's own eye influence how the subject is seen and understood. Representing participants in this artistic manner gives life to individuals through the process of discovery, appreciation, and respect the researcher gains from their attempt to render an authentic portrait. As Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) argue, portraits "speak to the head and the heart" (p. 243).

Writing about the girls in this intimate way was an important final step in my analysis. Not only was constructing such detailed stories about how I came to see each girl and our shifting relationship consistent with the narrative and relational ideologies behind my study, but crafting these portraits enabled me to deepen my understanding of each girl's strengths and individuality. The portraits provided a rich backdrop to my narrative analysis and enabled me to trace the shape of our relationship, outlining what Rogers et al. (1999) suggest can be understood between a speaker and a listener in narrative research.

Participants

There were 20 girls in the eighth grade at Fairfield School during the year of my research. The girls were divided into three sections and followed a block schedule with time for physical education and unified arts courses each day. While I spent time with all the eighth grade girls during my research, eight of the girls volunteered to participate in interviews. The eight girls who participated in interviews represented two different social groups in the school community, and their identification within these peer groups altered their relationships with teachers.

Four of the girls—Juliet, Callie, Shannon, and Fiona—described themselves as part of the "Girl Scout" social group, as all four girls were members of a local Scout troop. Juliet, Callie, and Shannon were white, lived with two parents, and came from lower-middle class backgrounds. Unlike her friends, Fiona was bi-racial and lived with her grandmother who faced serious financial difficulty. Despite their different backgrounds, all four girls embodied traditional white middle-class standards of femininity as kind, caring, accepting, and selfless (Brown, 1998). Although bi-racial, Fiona's identification with white, middle-class standards of femininity may have come from many influences, including encouragement from her teachers, relationships with her peers, or from being raised by her white grandmother. Like the middle-class girls in Brown's (1998) study, all four Girl Scouts struggled to reconcile their own strong feelings, such as anger or frustration, with this construction of femininity. However, it was perhaps because the girls embodied these particular values that teachers at Fairfield School spoke highly of the Girl Scouts and valued the girls' presence in their classes. However, such praise from their teachers often left the Girl Scouts vulnerable to teasing from their male and female peers, who described the girls using derogatory terms such as "goodie-goodies" and "kiss-ups."

The other four girls participating in my study were Cassandra, Diana, and twin sisters Eve and Emily. When I asked this group of girls to describe themselves, they told me that they were part of a clique that was into fashion. The "Fashion Girls," as they dubbed themselves, all came from lower-class backgrounds. All four Fashion Girls were white. Eve and Emily lived with two parents, Cassandra lived with her father and his girlfriend, and Diana lived with her foster mother. As Brown (1998) discovered in her group of working-class rural girls from Maine, I found that the Fashion Girls were willing to speak candidly about their anger and frustration in relation to experiences they viewed as unfair. Yet the Fashion Girls' ability to name their strong feelings and openly critique injustices set the girls at odds with adults in their school. In general, teachers viewed the Fashion Girls as loud, obnoxious, and sometimes promiscuous—the last, a stigma the girls believed was particularly unfair and inaccurate. Although I initially viewed the Fashion Girls in

a similar way, my interactions and conversations with the girls proved transformative. As I came to know the Fashion Girls more deeply, I grew to appreciate their strong, clear voices, their ability to reflect critically on their social world, and their capacity to support each other.

Representation and Responsibility in Interpretation

Conflicts of representation necessarily emerge in hearing and interpreting another person's life (Denzin, 1994; Luttrell 2003; Riessman, 1993; Rogers, 1997; Wengraf, 2001), as representation in qualitative research necessarily reflects the researcher's own identity. Rather than attempting to control for possible biases, qualitative researchers have a responsibility to make their interpretations, judgments, emotions, and interpretations visible to readers. As a white woman who lived in a rural area, teacher, graduate student, mother, and newcomer to Fairfield, my presence not only altered the scenes and stories of my research, but my identification with each of these categories circumscribed what I heard and understood. It is my identity as a teacher, in particular, that may have obscured my vision and ability to talk openly with the girls about their relationships with adults in their school, and in my writing I attempt to mark places where multiple interpretations are plausible. Although I identify myself as a teacher, my outsider status at Fairfield School may also have opened a space for candid conversations; in a rural area, where girls' close relationships often overlap, there was little concern that I would share knowledge from an interview with other members of the community. Likewise, I believe the six months I spent on site enabled me to establish a rapport with the girls and strengthen my ability to understand the challenges the girls faced in accessing supportive connections with adults in their school. Keeping detailed records of all my observations, interactions, and interviews played an important role in my ability to construct accurate representations of the girls' stories of identity and relationship. Collecting both ethnographic and narrative data provided me with a range of ways in which I came to know the girls and the cultural context of their school. During my data collection and memo writing, I was able to return to the girls and ask if my interpretations were accurate. As a final check against my interpretation, I worked in conjunction with other teachers, researchers, and social service workers engaged in supporting rural youth and healthy adolescent identity development and asked these colleagues to review my writing.

An Analysis of Eight Rural Girls' Narratives of Relationships with their Teachers

Disconnections Between Students and Teachers at Fairfield School

As one can imagine, students who were friendly, courteous, and engaged in learning seemed to have positive interactions with adults in their school, as was the case for girls in the Girl Scout clique. Hedlund and Hine (1995), in their study of teachers' influence on rural adolescents, examined the connections that "successful" young people make with adult mentors, making claims about the positive effect teachers can have on rural youth based on this selective cluster of students. However, descriptions of the positive rapport between students and teachers may be somewhat misleading. While on the surface the Girl Scouts appeared to get along well with adults in their school, these four girls tended to feel emotionally disconnected from their teachers.

When I asked whom they might confide in if they had to talk to an adult, the Girl Scouts mentioned ministers, neighbors, relatives, and Girl Scout leaders, but only one teacher—a fact that might surprise the Fairfield School faculty. Further, when I asked the Girls Scouts specifically about their relationships with their teachers, the four girls expressed a desire for greater understanding and support from these prominent adults in their lives.

For the Fashion Girls, who were more outspoken in the classroom, forging connection with teachers was an even greater struggle. The Fashion Girls often felt as though teachers had prejudged them based on hearsay or knowledge of their families. Whether true or not, this perception made the Fashion Girls skeptical whether their teachers were interested in their well-being. Although the Fashion Girls, like the Girl Scouts privately hoped for greater support from their teachers, the girls rarely solicited help from adults.

For both groups of girls, teachers' perceptions and gendered expectations inhibited the girls' ability to solicit and sustain authentic connections with their teachers, despite the girls' desire for such relationships. The following sections explore the different ways in which these barriers confined girls' ability to connect with their teachers and, in turn, the possible impact on the girls' individual identities.

Rumors and Reputations in a Small School

In the small community of Fairfield, reputations accompanied nearly every student into the classroom. Posters publicized the names of high-achieving students, and teachers often recognized students new to the community through networks of kinship or community associations. Many students had older siblings or parents who attended Fairfield School, giving teachers a connection with a particular family and the possibility that teachers would have a preconceived

notion of the students' abilities or behavior. Likewise, many teachers who worked in Fairfield for several years knew the landscape of the different neighborhoods well enough to have a sense of a student's socioeconomic background—a fact that some teachers would use to make prejudgments about a student's abilities. Rumors spread quickly throughout the school community, often exaggerating the truth. Just as Hedlund and Hine (1995, p. 4) found in their interviews with graduates of rural high schools, the phrase "everybody knows everything about everybody" seemed to ring true in the Fairfield School community—which increased the likelihood that teaches would hold presumptions about their students.

The Fashion Girls were forthcoming about the way in which rumors and reputations confined their sense of self and ability to form relationships with adults. In my interview with Cassandra, she spoke clearly about how prejudgments influenced her relationships with teachers:

> Teachers will talk about people. Like Miss Jones, when she was new, she was like, "I already heard a whole bunch of stuff about you guys."

When teachers enter into the classroom with ideas about how their students will act or behave, these constructions carry a powerful weight. Whether truth, fiction, or both, such preconceptions confine a girl's aspirations and diminish her ability to construct her own sense of identity. Where education optimally increases a child's agency, prejudgments act as a kind of straight-jacket, readily teaching children that opportunities for success and self-efficacy are not open to them because of their background. Though rooted in economic biases, such prejudices resemble attitudes of racial discrimination that arguably harm the achievement and healthy identity development of urban students of color (Fordham, 1996; Steele, 1997; Ward, 2000).

Unlike the Fashion Girls, the Girl Scouts were far more likely to benefit from their good standing in the school community. However, even the Girl Scouts believed that teachers' expectations could interfere with their ability to be known in the classroom. When I ask Callie what is difficult for her about school, she explains, "You can't be yourself in school. If you want to be wild or hyper, you can't." To which Juliet added, "There's a time to be yourself, but in school you have to be, like, not really yourself, [but more] mature and focused." When girls' reputations become polarized into categories of "good girls" and "bad girls," such labels not only create barriers to teachers' ability to appreciate the complex dimensions of girls' individual identities, but these labels also set groups of girls in opposition to each other.

Rural Girls and Gendered Expectations in School

For girls in rural schools, prejudgments may be coupled with gendered expectations about how females should act in school. Such constructions are often based on traditional white middle-class values of femininity (Brown, 1998, Fine, 1988, Tolman, 2002), which expect "good girls" to be polite, kind, quiet, caring, docile, passive, cooperative, and lacking sexual desire. The girls at Fairfield School not only received contradictory messages about femininity, but they found such constructions impossible to fulfill as well. Brown (1998, p. 196) describes a similar double bind, observing that working-class rural girls' "distrust of authorities, the confusing, often contradictory messages they receive about appropriate behavior, and their justified belief that they will not be heard or taken seriously" all contributed to girls' anger in school. Such mixed messages leave rural girls feeling frustrated and disconnected from their teachers, especially if girls fear they may be misunderstood or misrepresented in conversations with their teachers. Teachers' gendered expectations played a role in the girls' inability to connect with teachers for both the Fashion Girls and Girl Scouts social groups.

My relationship with Cassandra, one of the Fashion Girls, mimicked these gendered expectations and challenged my own biases about femininity in the classroom. Although Cassandra was one of the younger girls in the eighth grade, her appearance and worldly knowledge seemed to belie this fact. Cassandra's mother and brother were in prison for drug-related offenses, and Cassandra lived with her father, his girlfriend, and the girlfriend's daughter. Cassandra's father, mother, and brother did not complete high school, and Cassandra spoke of her family's resistant attitudes toward education. Despite the fact that Cassandra was a spirited participant—one of the few girls to engage in discussions with such enthusiasm—more often than not teachers became frustrated with Cassandra's sometimes recalcitrant participation. Loud, verbose, and always willing to share whatever was on her mind, Cassandra often drew attention away from the focus of the day's conversation.

One afternoon, I observed Cassandra's English class while students worked together on a group project. From the side of the room, I watched Cassandra threaten to reveal her friend Emily's secrets if Emily did not share a sip of her water. Armed with a backpack full of interview transcripts about the prevalence of bullying at Fairfield School and flushed with anger, I approached Cassandra's table. I explained to Cassandra what I had observed and why I was angry, to which Cassandra retorted, "Teachers are so unfair to girls in this school!" It was a sentiment I shared from my own middle school experience and one that caused me to turn around. I, too, had felt teachers treated girls unfairly when I was an adolescent, and my deep concern for girls' education as an adult had, in fact, motivated my study in Fairfield.

Cassandra's comment caught me off guard. Had I forgotten what it was like to be an adolescent girl? Was I, the feminist researcher, being accused of being unfair to girls? *Was* I being unfair to girls? What was Cassandra saying? Instead of walking away and seeking out another student who might have needed my attention, I sat down at Cassandra's table, asked what she meant, and listened to what she had to say. It was a rare meeting, one that might be difficult for a teacher to orchestrate midway through a class when other students need attention. A step removed from Cassandra's teachers in both position and responsibility, I was fortunate to be able to spend this time with Cassandra and invited her to speak further with me in an interview.

The following week, we met in the library for an interview. I explained that I was visiting her school because I shared her concern about how girls fare in rural schools like hers. Given the opportunity to speak, Cassandra suddenly erupted. She was focused and serious, revealing a series of stories about gendered incidents she experienced in school this past year.

A pivotal narrative highlights the conflicting and gendered expectations Cassandra felt her teachers sent:

> One time, I had—I have a halter top, I have two of them, kind of, well, one of them's like a tube top. And they were like the same, kind of like you could see pretty much the same thing, and Melissa was wearing one, and I was wearing one, and I got in trouble for it, and Melissa didn't . . . [The teacher] was like, "That's shirt is inappropriate." She made me zip up my sweater . . . Melissa didn't get in trouble. I was like, "Hers shows probably more than mine does." And [Miss C.] was like, "Yeah, but Melissa doesn't have anything to show, so she doesn't have to change, or she doesn't have to put a sweater on over it."

In listening to Cassandra recount this memory, I was struck by how similar her story was to a narrative from Brown's (1998) study in which a teacher demanded a female student remove her coat in the classroom. Similar to Brown's (1998) findings, not only did Cassandra's teacher's reprimand seem arbitrary, but it sent an implicit message about Cassandra's own identity. In Cassandra's narrative, Melissa, a more popular girl from a wealthier family, came much closer to her teachers' idealized example of femininity, particularly in her less mature sexual development. Cassandra, who came from what she calls a "bad" family, was punished because of factors that are beyond her control.

As in Fine's (1988) discussion of female sex education in American schools, Miss C. sent a powerful message about the need for Cassandra to control and cover—both literally and figuratively—her developing body and budding sexuality. Miss C.'s bias in singling out Cassandra fueled

Cassandra's anger. While Cassandra zipped up her sweater to cover her breasts, her compliance cannot be read as a positive sign of a conflict averted. Ultimately, Cassandra interpreted Miss C.'s reprimand to suggest that she should be ashamed of who she is. Whether or not this was Miss C.'s intent, this incident served to alienate Cassandra from her teachers, who inhabited a world far from Cassandra's experience and reach.

Cassandra told me another story about a recent incident in her reading class:

> Diana was wearing sunglasses inside Ms. Schumaker's room, and she kicked Diana out. But when Miles told me, "Shut the f___ up you stupid b___," he didn't get in trouble for it . . . [Miles] just said it to me, and he said it, and [Mrs. Schumaker's] like, "Yeah." So, she called me back over, and she's like, "What did he say?" And I told her. And she's like, "God, you're so annoying." I just walked away from her cause it was the end of class, anyways. And she's like, "I'm going to write him up. And then she never did. She never wrote him up.

I searched for the meaning in Cassandra's story—what she took away from this experience and why this particular moment has stayed with her. Whether or not Mrs. Schumaker said "God, you're so annoying," or merely cast Cassandra a look that Cassandra interpreted as such, matters much less than Cassandra's understanding of this story. What Cassandra inferred from this moment was a lesson about how she believed her teachers saw her. For students like Cassandra, whose parents view schools as a site they have resisted or been excluded from, the messages these girls hear from their teachers may be complicated by their divided allegiances to parents already distrustful or disdainful of education. In Cassandra's narrative, it is not Mrs. Schumaker's kicking Diana out of class or her comment of "God, you're so annoying" that upset Cassandra as much as her teacher's failure to act in her defense. Like the message Cassandra received about her body from Miss C., Cassandra interpreted Miss Schumaker's failure to write up Miles—although possibly forgotten unintentionally—as a message about whether or not Cassandra was deserving of protection.

The failure of teachers to act on students' behalf, be it out of their own anxieties, busyness, misreading of a situation, or ignorance, sent a powerful message to many of the girls about their worth—a sentiment Callie also described in her reflections on her peer's bullying. For students whose parents felt similarly about their experiences in education, this message reinforces the idea that they, too, may not be cut out for education. Unlike Cassandra, Callie, one of the Girl Scouts, came closer to the idealized image of femininity many of her teachers expected, and Callie shared her teachers' middle-class values. Callie was kind, quiet, altruistic,

and never one to make a fuss in classes. Callie's mother worked within the school system and was in frequent contact with Callie's teachers. However, like Cassandra, Callie also believed her teachers sent strong messages about her worth in the classroom, as they did not defend her when she was teased by a group of her peers. Callie explained, "Sometimes [my teachers] will say something, but a lot of times they'll let it slip. They just let it slide—they don't mention it." When I asked Callie if this made her upset, she said this:

> Sometimes it does, especially for me, cause, like I said last time, in the other class, there were a few times where I was being picked on and stuff, and the teachers, they didn't really, like, do anything about it. They just kind of would catch 'em doing it, and they didn't say anything about it, really... Well, I also notice sometimes in class, if I have my work done, and stuff, I'll sometimes, like watch the teachers… They're working on their computers or, like, putting grades in and stuff. And pretty much, while they are doing that, people are doing other things than what they're supposed to. And really, [the teachers] don't see it. So, I think, maybe if they paid more attention to the class, other than doing their work, like, putting grades in and stuff.

Callie's anger at the situation ran so deep that she later confessed, "I felt like I wanted to just physically injure [the bullies]," but believed "if I did that, I would get in more trouble than they would have gotten into." For Callie, asking for support would mean revealing her anger and risk exposing a side of herself her teachers may not approve of—a dilemma that further distances Callie from her teachers.

In their narratives, both Callie and Cassandra tell stories about how male perpetrators escape discipline, leaving both girls vulnerable, unable to act, and cut off from their teachers. For Callie and Cassandra, it is not their teachers' actions but their teachers' failure to act that serves to disengage the girls. These moments can happen quickly in classrooms and even seem innocuous, yet repeated over time such incidents send conflicting messages to girls about their own worth and their ability to navigate the confusing and gendered expectations of their school community.

Across my interviews, girls from both social groups believed teachers not only treated boys and girls differently, but also had different expectations and biases that favored boys. Fiona explained that, in her science class, it seems like her teacher paid no attention to her: "I had my hand raised for like 20 minutes, and he just ignored me. Just talking to all the boys and everything." Fiona's belief that teachers pay more attention to boys in the classroom has been well documented by researchers on gender and education (AAUW, 1995; Sadker & Sadker, 1994; Orenstein, 1994).

Shannon felt that teachers often adopted a "boys will be boys" attitude and therefore responded permissively when boys acted violently or aggressively. When one boy in her grade shoved Shannon repeatedly, Shannon's mother made Shannon tell one of her teachers. However, Shannon thought her teacher's response of "Oh, we'll watch him" was far too passive, and she told me that the same boy still picks on people in her grade. Juliet echoed a similar sentiment when she explained to me, "I think [teachers] should do a little bit more instead of write detentions, because [the boys are] just going to keep doing it over and over again. Nothing happens." In my final interview with Eve, Emily, Cassandra, and Diana, all four girls believed that their teachers thought boys were smarter than girls, "So, like, [boys] can get away with—they don't really need to do anything."

In the extreme, boys' behaviors constitute sexual harassment, and the stigma surrounding girls' sexuality may lead teachers to signal that such acts are a girl's fault. In the following passage, Cassandra recalled such an experience:

> I can think of another time when boys were treated differently from girls. When we were wearing skirts, me, Angela, and Diana, they were, like, up to here, but we were wearing shorts underneath them, so it wasn't like anything bad, and high schoolers wear tight skirts. It has to be down, to, like, your fingertips, and they weren't. And then all the boys, when we walked into class, and they're like, "Woooo." And they were, like, yelling, and stuff. And they were trying to look up our skirts. And we got kicked out of class... Yeah. And then my dad called the school. And he was so mad about it. Cause they didn't get in trouble for anything.

Although girls are legally protected by Title IX from sexual harassment in schools, it is difficult to imagine any of the girls in Fairfield having the social or economic capital to bring about a lawsuit that challenges the acceptance of such incidents. In her book, *School Girls*, Peggy Orenstein argues that sexual harassment in schools often "confirms [girls'] belief that boys' sexuality is uncontrollable while their own must remain in check" (Orenstein, 1994, p. 117). She further argues that, in the face of such culturally sanctioned behavior, girls feel that they have few options to challenge such behaviors. For rural girls in particular, there is a risk that such behavior may be so embedded within the culture around them that they come to feel that their anger, hurt, and shame are misplaced feelings, particularly when teachers fail to acknowledge and respond to acts of sexual harassment. For the Fashion Girls, teachers' gendered expectations made the girls silent in the face of boys' harassment, as teachers presumed the Fashion Girls to act inappropriately and invite male harassment. For the Girl Scouts, the gendered expecta-

tion that "good girls" should be silent, passive, and in control of strong feelings left the girls feeling disempowered to act, particularly in the face of boys' harassment.

Miscommunications Between Students and Teachers

In the previous section, both Callie's and Cassandra's actions raise questions about the reasons teachers might inadvertently isolate and discourage rural adolescent girls as they begin to craft a sense of self. In light of these stories, decoding how students and teachers read and misread each other is vital to understanding ineffective patterns of communication that alienate rural teachers and students alike. Reflecting on her observations of rural girls in Maine, Brown (1998, p. 183) explains the nature of miscommunication in the school community where she worked:

> Just as the girls cannot read their teachers, it would seem that the teachers cannot read the girls. From the girls' perspective, their women teachers allow no space for their ways of communicating and interacting. As a result, the girls feel cut off, literally and figuratively pushed out of the classroom. In response to such situations, the Mansfield girls feel compelled to defend angrily their versions of reality and their behavior.

Teachers in rural schools must think critically about the different ways in which girls communicate their strong feelings, desire for help, and sense of self.

I think back about my own misreading of Cassandra's behavior early on in my time at Fairfield. Hearing Cassandra's struggle to be heard over the frequent silencing and reprimands she receives in school, I can reread her forthright and outspoken nature as a form of resistance against self-silencing, self-hatred, and shame. Cassandra's refusal to accept the conditions of femininity recapitulated by the adults in her school represents a bold and defiant act, as traditional passive and selfless models of femininity may not serve Cassandra well as she goes through life. For girls like Cassandra, teachers need to consider the possibility of reading the subtle messages her behavior conveys and how such resistance in the classroom may signal a healthy refusal to accept the restrictive nature of her reputation.

On the other hand, Callie, who was quieter about her anger and frustration, also suffered when her teachers failed to act on her behalf. When girls believe that they must conceal their true thoughts and feelings in a classroom, disconnections from others and their own sense of self inevitably follow. For girls like Callie, teachers must help girls learn how to recognize, name, and hold onto strong feelings in the classroom and avoid reading compliance as a sign of psychological health.

The Complexity of Caring for Rural Girls in School

Rural Girls Struggle to Ask for Help

In my second round of interviews, I talked with each girl about her supportive relationships with adults. While the girls mentioned Girl Scout leaders, youth ministers, sisters, mothers, and step-mothers, the absence of their teachers from their lists was startling. For example, Juliet went into depth about how comfortable she is talking to the adults at her church. When I asked about whether she would confide in her teachers, Juliet replied, "I'd be, like, [pause] I don't really talk to them." Across both groups of girls, I believe that rural attitudes of self-reliance and independence inhibited the girls from actively requesting support from their teachers (Dudley et al., 2004; Weinert & Long, 1987).

I believe the Girl Scouts also had difficulty soliciting support from their teachers for two reasons: First, the Girl Scouts struggled to articulate their true feelings or fears, as doing so would risk complicating adults' views of the girls as competent and congenial. Second, because their peers teased them for being "goodie-goodies," the Girl Scouts did not want to risk drawing further attention to their relationships with teachers.

Because the Fashion Girls believed adults did not respect or like them, asking for support from their teachers may have seemed unrealistic in the face of the girls' distrust of adults. This possibility for the Fashion Girls to connect with their teachers may have been complicated by the fact that teachers often openly praised the Girl Scouts for qualities such as compliance. It is also possible that the Fashion Girls feared their request for help in personal matters might be made public to other members of the community. Because the Fashion Girls' parents had predominantly negative experiences in education, this tension may have further distanced the girls from adults in their school community.

Nurturing Respect

When I asked what recommendations both groups of girls might make to facilitate better relationships between students and teachers, I was startled by the clarity, poignancy, and maturity of the girls' recommendations. Across my interviews, the girls wished for greater respect from their teachers. On the surface, the teachers showed their students courtesy and kindness; however, they did not necessarily demonstrate a deeper respect for their students. Granting someone respect means prizing them as an individual, recognizing the challenges they have faced, and valuing the potential to do good that resides inside of them. An essential aspect of respect is a willingness to listen to and empathize with others, take their stories and concerns seri-

ously, and recognize that there are multiple ways of being in and thinking about the world. Respect requires humility, a giving over of power to someone else. Respect, as Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot (2000, p. 10) argues, cannot fully exist in the construction of hierarchies, but arises "from efforts to break with routine, and imagine other ways of giving and receiving trust, and in doing so, creating relationships among equals."

I occasionally observed teachers abusing their power in the classroom and treating their students without a great deal of respect. Repeatedly, all the eighth-grade students complained about study hall and begged me to pull them out of this period for their interviews. Once, when I went to meet Shannon and Fiona in their study hall, I found it as awful as they had described it to be. In an effort to preempt any form of misconduct (including talking), a teacher stood at the front of the room and yelled at the students to sit down and shut up. She was harsh with them; all authority, no patience. When I escaped with Shannon and Fiona, we all let out a sigh of relief. In her interview, Eve recalled another time when a teacher "screamed in my face, 'You need to shut up and learn to listen! I only say it once!'" Such statements clearly violate appropriate teacher conduct and isolate students from teachers.

As in such instances, disrespect in its boldest forms is easiest to spot. However, as Cassandra suggests at the opening of this article, it can also be subtle, such as a small remark about someone's family or background. It is not difficult for me to imagine the difficulty teachers might have in respecting students when they disapprove of their behavior. However, searching for the deeper meaning behind those behaviors and listening carefully to what their students are saying might open spaces where teachers can see their students more clearly.

The Desire to be Known

What the eight girls in my study described wanting most from their teachers was to be known. "Hear kids out—what they have to say," Emily suggested, implying that listening can go a long way in building a relationship. Many of the teachers at Fairfield might be surprised by how deeply girls want their teachers to see them not only for who they are, but also for the potential they hold. At the end of her second interview, Cassandra disclosed what she wished for in her teachers:

> Don't judge [students]. Like, if they do drugs or something, you can't judge them and say that they're a bad kid. Because if you judge a kid like they're bad, they're obviously not going to do the right thing... And don't treat boys differently than girls. And girls—don't treat other people differ-

ently. Treat everyone the same. And the teacher teaches kids things. Not just school work, but they should teach them other stuff. Like how to be a good person. Cause, like, if teachers are good to you, you'll know that adults are good… If teachers treat you good, then you'll want to be good.

Often discounted by her teachers as too resistant and defiant to help, Cassandra sought guidance and care to help her to become the person she hoped to become.

An Example of Care in the Classroom

Listening to Cassandra, Eve, Emily, Diana, Fiona, Juliet, Shannon, and Callie, I concluded that what these girls hoped for most was to know that their teachers care about them. Yet how might teachers translate the girls' recommendations into practice? The following story from my ethnographic research provides a practical example of what care in the classroom might look like between teachers and rural adolescent girls.

One afternoon, midway through my time at Fairfield School, Emily arrived at Mr. Matthews' classroom door late and in tears. She told Mr. Matthews that she accidentally threw her retainer in the trash when she emptied her lunch tray. Emily's story rippled through the classroom, as her classmates set down their pencils and looked up from their journals. Diana and Cassandra stood at Emily's side and asked Mr. Matthews if they could help Emily look for the missing retainer. Mr. Matthews sent Emily off to the cafeteria, accompanied by Cassandra. He told Diana to remain in the room, though it hardly seemed worth it, as she was immediately up and down, in and out of her seat.

I tried to assist by collecting the journals and opening the day's discussion. But just as I told the students to pull out their books, Cassandra rushed back into the room and reported that the lunch trash had already been taken out. Lucky, I thought, the dumpster was emptied that morning (an event that caused a 10-minute disruption each Thursday morning in Mr. Mathew's first English section). Mr. Matthews signaled to me that he was leaving and walked the girls out of the room. I tried to pull the class back to task, telling them not to worry and to focus. But they were busy talking among themselves: "Retainers cost $200." "My mom would kill me if I lost my retainer." Within minutes, the students were all looking out of the classroom window at Mr. Matthews, Cassandra, and Emily rooting through the dumpster. One boy stood by the window, giving a play-by-play report of their efforts, as engaged in the scene as one might be standing on the sidelines of a soccer match. Diana was out of her seat. I pleaded with them, saying, "If you lost your retainer, you might not want everyone watching. Please don't make Emily feel worse or more embarrassed."

But I might as well have been whispering to cheering fans watching a sudden death shoot-out to decide the winner of the World Cup.

Nearly a half hour passed. Cassandra and Emily stepped away from the dumpster and walked inside. Mr. Matthews followed. By this time we were all caught up in the suspense, the lesson deserted for the drama unfolding before us. Had they found the retainer or did they abandon the search? A few minutes later, Cassandra burst through the door and announced to the class that they had found the retainer, and a triumphant smile spread across her face. Emily followed, though shortly after because she first had to tell her twin sister the good news. Mr. Matthews arrived back at the classroom last. Instead of sitting down, I watched him walk over to some of the students and pretend that he was about to wipe his hands off on the back of their shirts. A few of the girls shrieked. One of the boys moved away quickly. "Relax," he told them, "we were wearing rubber gloves." It was a small, playful gesture, but something that caught my eye.

Whatever discussion was planned, the lesson Mr. Matthews demonstrated was far more valuable, as he stood outside raking his hands through the lunch rubbish to help search for the missing retainer. Mr. Matthews is a parent and no doubt familiar with the expense of orthodontic equipment. I could imagine my own father out combing through trash bags to search for a lost retainer, or teddy bear, or favorite locket, or myself doing the same for my son. But how much more this must have meant for Emily, Cassandra, and their eager-eyed classmates to know that Mr. Matthews not only cared about his students enough to join them in digging through the lunchtime trash, but also that he took their concerns seriously. What I recall most vividly about this scene was Mr. Matthews' playfulness when he returned to the classroom. His ability to tease his students suggested the kind of easiness that is readily visible in strong relationships.

Frequently, after the final bell, high school students often stopped by Mr. Matthews' room to visit with him. They sat in his chair, wrote on his white board, and talked to him about their lives. They must have known, like Emily, that this was a teacher that they could count on. For some rural students, such a connection may be transformative, even a lifeline. Mr. Matthews' small but kind act stayed with me long after my time in Fairfield. My favorite handbook on teaching, Parker Palmer's (1998) *The Courage to Teach*, emphasizes the power teachers have to touch and transform their students' lives. Perhaps it is teachers, like Mr. Matthews, who are willing to risk getting their hands dirty—to step into the muck of their students' lives and help their students find the parts of themselves they had lost or forgotten or did not know existed—who are most able to experience such transformative a power.

Recommendations for Rural Teachers

While I have no doubt that most teachers at Fairfield care deeply about their students, enabling students to recognize, feel, and respond to their care may require a different kind of attention. Noddings (1992) has written extensively about the difficulty teachers face in building supportive relationships with students in the current culture of American education. She argues that emphasis on curriculum, instruction, and classroom management often comes at the expense of guiding children in their healthy psychological development. Caring for students in this way attends not just to their academic needs, but their emotional, spiritual, moral, and relational development as well. Developing such relationships may be the first line of defense in helping rural girls establish a sense of self-worth, develop a healthy identity, and recognize their full potential. Based on my work with these eight rural adolescent girls, I offer the following suggestions for caring for rural adolescent girls in school.

1. Modeling respect must be the foundation of all interactions between students and teachers. Care begins with the idea that each student has something valuable to contribute to a classroom, whether it is in her strength as a writer or competence as a leader among her peers. Girls want to know that teachers will be invested in their well-being, open to hearing their voices, and compassionate listeners. Reading beneath the surface of girls' outward behaviors may enable teachers to develop a sense of respect for girls who act out in a classroom setting. Likewise, providing girls with the opportunity to express a range of emotions freely will aid teachers' ability to come to know the girls in their classroom more deeply.

2. In rural communities where tight networks of relationships can facilitate teachers' knowledge about individual girls, teachers need to actively resist forming preordained opinions about particular students. Negative prejudgments, in particular, have a strong impact on a teachers' ability to connect with girls, particularly when girls believe that such labels have become a fixed aspect of their identity. Rural girls need to know that despite their family background, socioeconomic status, or prior experiences in school, teachers are willing to recognize each girls' potential and different strengths.

3. In reflecting on how they might best support rural girls, teachers need to examine their own gendered expectations for both girls and boys and be cautious about how such attitudes are replicated in the classroom. Teachers must offer girls multiple pathways into womanhood that value a range of ways to be female. Frank conversations about the role of gender in shaping one's identity are necessary among teachers and between students and teachers. In communities where girls report experiencing some form of male violence, bullying, aggression, or sexual harassment, male teachers working with rural youth have a special responsibility to

model healthy expressions of masculinity. Male and female teachers can establish a setting in which such acts are not tolerated and model respectful relationships with others. Here, teachers need to be particularly careful about misreading girls' silences in the face of bullying as a sign a girl has not been hurt by such offenses.

4. Miscommunications between girls and teachers can take place when both girls and their teachers misread or misjudge intentions and behaviors. One strategy teachers may find helpful is to consider the deeper meaning behind girls' behaviors. For example, girls who are disruptive or outspoken in the classroom may be attempting to communicate their struggle to make their voice heard. Both teachers and girls need to know that moments of disconnection are inevitable within relationships (Spencer, 2000), but reaching out after such moments can prove to be transformative. When girls and teachers face miscommunications, talking about what happened between them, rather than overlooking the incident, can be a meaningful learning experience for both parties.

5. In supporting girls' ability to craft a strong sense of self, teachers need to find ways to offer girls the means for self-expression in the classroom and recognition for their different strengths. One way to accommodate this is to build activities into the middle school curriculum such as reflective journal writing in an English classroom, self-portraiture in an art class, or mapping their communituy's history in a social studies course. Teachers must be flexible in celebrating the individual accomplishments of girls in a range of areas, including academic work, social relationships, leadership, artistic craft, or athletic competition. Teachers might also help girls to channel their different strengths into productive and meaningful work, such as inviting an outspoken and gregarious girl to participate in a theater production or nominating a competent but quiet girl for a role in student government.

6. For rural girls, who may be particularly resistant to the idea of asking for help or support directly because of community attitudes valuing self-reliance, fear that their concerns will be made public, or anxiety that revealing strong feelings will be harmful, teachers might consider extending an invitation of support. Teachers might eat lunch with students on a weekly or even monthly basis. Checking in with students during advisory or homeroom periods might provide girls with an opportunity to ask for assistance. Inviting girls to keep reflective journals might provide a space in which girls can request help without fearing that others will know. Reading girls' subtle cues for requests for help can help teachers to recognize when a girl is struggling. When girls do request support, it is imperative for teachers to be careful about a girls' confidentiality, as rumors can spread quickly in small communities.

7. A final way that teachers might communicate care to girls is to maintain contact with parents. For parents who are invested in their daughter's education, parent-teacher conferences, phone calls, or email conversations can provide opportunities for parents and teachers to collaborate in supporting a girls' development. However, when the parents of rural girls have not finished high school or gone onto college, their children's investment in education and relationships with teachers can obscure family allegiances. Even though parents might express heartfelt investment in their child's education, rural students may experience feelings of shame, doubt, uncertainty, or disloyalty when they surpass their parents' level of education. Rural teachers need to recognize the potential for such tensions and respect the family ties that play an important role in a child's healthy development. Finding ways to meet with parents in school, in the community, or in a students' home might help to dismantle tensions between family loyalty and education.

The issue of care—how it is communicated, felt, experienced, and interpreted—is a complicated one in schools. Teachers may find that communicating care for students is difficult because of the host of challenges teachers face in their daily work, such as pressure to move through curricular material, limited time to spend with individual students, strained financial and staff resources, or feelings of exhaustion. Further research is needed to address the ways in which providing adequate support for teachers influences their ability to care for students.

I have no doubt that rural teachers do care deeply about their students. However, as Brown and Gilligan (1992) point out, opening oneself to connections with students is often difficult for teachers, and maybe more so for teachers who live and work in close-knit communities with little privacy. When rural teachers experience the multiple stressors of limited resources within their school, increasing pressure to meet national standards, resistance to education, time constraints, and goals or values that may differ from those of their students, it is easy to imagine how the language of care can be mistranslated.

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