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Little sisters: An exploration of agency, cultural borderlands, and institutional constraints in the lives of two teenage girls

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Introduction

FOR SEVERAL YEARS, I HAVE BEEN MENTORING TWO GIRLS, VERONICA AND OLIVIA, who live in poverty and who are crisscrossed by crises and hardship almost daily. I began in 2000 with Veronica, whom I was matched with through the mentoring organization, Big Brothers and Big Sisters, in Oakland, California. She was nine years old when we began our relationship. Several years later, in 2003, I met her new neighbor, Olivia, who was 14 at the time. The two girls quickly become friends, and so I began to invite Olivia regularly with Veronica on our weekend visits.[1] Since then, I have continued to see both of them regularly.

My involvement in their lives has brought me face to face with the crushing realities of social injustice. Just when they have swallowed one injustice or trauma, another one hits, and they keep coming, and coming. Yet the girls move from crisis to crisis as if this were "normal." For them, it is. For me, it is education in the deepest sense, outrage, and a grasping for signs of hope. In this article, I attempt to find some lessons that can be shared by exploring the development of agency in this intercultural, interracial, and economically diverse space that lies along the borders of three female lives — the girls' and mine.

The scenery and events of the drama in their lives change so often that I had to rewrite this article one month after it was originally submitted. So much had changed that the original interpretation had become a fiction; my desire to attach meaning to the ongoing current, which embodied a past, present, and future, therefore could not be neatly captured. The first version gave trajectories to the two

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girls' lives. Veronica's was increasingly a story of failure in school, and Olivia's was the inverse. The two trajectories begged two questions: why and how? Given that both girls are profoundly "at risk" for school failure, what explanation could I offer for the amazing upsurge in Olivia's academic performance, as measured by her grades, attendance, and teachers' comments in 2005? What was the reason for the worsening in Veronica's academic performance during that period? A month later, I was no longer comfortable with this story, much less its interpretation. And yet, was there some remaining undercurrent of truth?

Central to the original article was my exploration of two concepts — agency and borderlands — that I thought helped to explain the divergent school performances of these two girls. The revised version also probes these concepts for their utility in the pursuit of social justice for young women like Veronica and Olivia. However, the theme of dynamic change is always in the background, pushing the reader to imagine the story continuing beyond words that so easily capture, frame, and fix the girls' identities and struggles. Rather than seeing the text as an enclosure, I prefer to think of it as a portal through which the girls are passing.

Agency and Borderlands

Theorizing about agency is fraught with controversy and differing definitions. The concept of agency traditionally implies individual choice and action — "the intentional capacity to identify and implement alternatives" (Mirón and Lauria, 1998: 189). This article asks instead whether agency can be promoted together with a focus on helping youth navigate complex cultural borderlands, and if so, what the implications are for schools, social service providers, and families as socializing institutions.

In contemporary gender theory, for example, there is controversy over "the extent to which emancipatory politics requires the conception of an individual agent capable of self-reflection, self-determination, and autonomy," or whether agency is "merely the result of the cultural (including gender) constitution of the subject" (Peter, 2003: 26). Fraser (1989) rejects this dichotomy as false: "the situatedness of agents need not imply robbing people of their autonomy" (as cited in Peter, 2003: 26).

Similarly, Pierson, interviewing social philosopher Anthony Giddens, called the relationship between structure and agency one of the "most ubiquitous and difficult issues in all social theory" (Giddens and Pierson, 1997: 75). The difficulty, according to Giddens, is that agency has been seen as "contained within the individual," rather than as a "flow of people's actions" connected to self-consciousness (p. 76). Giddens argues that agency is "the capability to have done otherwise" (p. 78), but this does not mean that "the world is plastic to the will of the individual" (p. 80).

Feminist theory places more emphasis on the social, relational part of agency. "Taking people seriously as agents means taking their relationships and commitments to other people seriously as well" (Peter, 2003: 23). Yet Martin Sokefeld argues

that anthropology may have given too much importance to culture, "reducing the self to a product of culture and often remaining blind to individual motivations, aims, and struggles" (1999: 15).

Closely related to the concept of agency is that of resilience, "the ability to bounce back successfully despite exposure to severe risks" (Benard, 1993, cited in Krovetz, 1997: 2). Much of the educational literature on adolescents who are at risk seeks to discover what helps individuals become resilient. The aim is to integrate these elements within educational institutions and families so that more young people will become resilient. However, this construct begs the question of what counts as "successfully bouncing back" and who gets to decide whether it is "successful" or not. In cases of extreme violence, does simple survival qualify as resilience? Part of the problem with the first version of this article was that I assumed an endpoint at which the girls could be framed as resilient. However, the reality is more fluid. People may be highly resilient at some times, and less resilient at other times.

For this reason, I find the concept of agency more fundamental, less loaded with assumptions, and thus more useful. Exercising agency is a part of becoming a more resilient individual because one must choose along the way, and those choices, always shaped by one's cultural and structural context, eventually result in a pattern that some people might call "resilience." Agency can be manifested in a number of ways, some of which may be unproductive in terms of helping a student along a pathway to success in school (i.e., certain forms of resistance), and others of which may help students to achieve school success (Mirón and Lauria, 1998; O'Connor, 1997). For Veronica and Olivia, cultural and institutional constraints make a huge difference in the ways in which they are able to exercise agency.

The second concept I explore in this article is that of social and cultural border-lands. In 1989, Rosaldo wrote extensively about "border crossings":

> Human cultures are neither necessarily coherent nor always homogeneous. More often than we usually care to think, our lives are crisscrossed by border zones, pockets, and eruptions of all kinds. Social borders frequently become salient around such lines as sexual orientation, gender, class, race, ethnicity, nationality, age, politics, dress, food, or taste (1989: 207–208).

Rosaldo goes on to discuss the creative, productive, "many stranded possibilities of the borderlands" (p. 216) as a site for innovation in which individual identities become stronger (like Gloria Anzaldúa's *mestiza* in her book*, Borderlands/La Frontera*), rather than ambivalent. The concept of hybridity arose in resistance to essentialist notions of identity that posed a norm of coherent, uniform cultures within which individuals develop strong, culturally rooted identities (Bhabha, 1994; Canclini, 1997). Cultural hybridity, like the borderlands Rosaldo and Anzaldúa refer to, is fluid, not this or that, but something else besides, or what Bhabha calls

"a third space" that can be defined positively as itself, not as the absence of the "authentic" or "pure" cultures that supposedly preceded it.

Ethical Considerations

Analyzing two cases in no way creates a generalizable picture, and these case studies were not "designed" with a systematic inquiry in mind. Purely personal reasons were the impetus for my relationship with the two girls, not my scholarly interest in research. I have resisted the temptation to "collect data" on them because I did not wish to turn their lives into objects for my study. However, as I noted in an earlier article (Henze, 2005), the personal and social learning I gained through the relationship is too important to keep under cover. As a researcher committed to the ideals of social justice and equity, I have a responsibility to share, if not results of systematic inquiry, at least the stories I have heard.

To understand these stories, it is important for me to reveal my positionality, especially aspects of it that might affect the relationship and my understanding of the girls' lives. I have known Veronica since 2000; she is now 14 and I have been her "Big Sister" for five years. During this time, I have maintained almost continual contact with her, first during weekly outings lasting six to eight hours, and more recently during overnight visits every three weeks in which we spend Saturday and Sunday together, often with Olivia as well. Between 2003 and 2005, Veronica was in a group home. During that time her grandmother, aunt and uncle, and I formed a family "circle" around her, each taking her to our homes once every three weekends on a rotating schedule. Veronica and her blood relatives consider me to be part of the extended family. She calls me "Sissie" (for sister), although I am much too old to be a real sister to her.

My relationship with Olivia is somewhat different. I have known her only since 2003 (about three years now); she is older (16 at the time of this writing) and more mature than is Veronica in many ways; and I am not as connected to her family as I am to Veronica's. I talk with her mother occasionally, but have little contact with other family members. I support her and mentor her alongside Veronica, but I also sometimes see her separately.

My lifestyle and background is worlds away from theirs in terms of racialized identities and social class. I am European American, Veronica is Latina/European American, and Olivia is African American. I was raised in a privileged family in Southern California, went to the best schools, traveled to Europe several times when I was young, and had access to all the "habitus" of privilege in the U.S. Although I have rejected some aspects of that habitus (or failed to measure up, some might say!), I still have many advantages because of it. Veronica's curious reaction when she visited my home for the first time at age nine sums it up: "Why is it so quiet here?" Although I do not live in a luxurious mansion in the hills, my Oakland neighborhood, compared to the busy thoroughfare where she lived with her mother, must have seemed eerily peaceful to her.

Both girls know I am writing an article about them, and have heard me talk about parts of it, particularly when I ask them to fill in gaps for me or when I ask them what they think about some of the differences between their lives. We have also talked about writing an article together in the future, and Olivia, who likes to write and does so regularly in a journal, was enthusiastic about this idea. I have spent many hours considering the ethical implications of this act of writing — whether it is formalized research that demands all the procedures of human subjects guidelines, or whether the girls are more like family members whose lives are embedded with mine. I decided that it is more the latter, which in no way removes the obligation to be ethical. To ensure this, I have told the girls that I am writing about them, invited them to talk about their differences and similarities, and have attempted to assure that no harm comes to them through this process.

Revealing Similarities and Differences

When educators talk and write about at-risk young people, they often refer to students who have one or two risk factors. But Veronica and Olivia have them all. Their mothers have a history of drug addiction, and their fathers are absent. Both have been homeless for years at a time and have witnessed physical violence among family members and neighbors. Both girls have been raped — Veronica by a neighbor when she was six, and Olivia by a cousin when she was 16. Their schooling has been interrupted for long periods of time, and both have attended many schools. Their health care has also been neglected or sporadic at best. Until recently, both girls were doing extremely poorly in school.

If one looks at the literature on adolescent success and failure in school, one could easily conclude that the risk factors affecting these girls would make school failure a likely outcome. Yet Olivia began to gain ground in the first half of 2005, while the younger Veronica appeared to take on more and more of the trappings of school failure. What accounted for the difference? Was there anything in either girl's social context that might explain it? My focus on the social and institutional context would not preclude other explanations based on innate differences such as personality, or different kinds of intelligence or other biological factors.

In the past month, however, two major events occurred. After spending over a year in a group home, Veronica was moved to a new foster family. The move followed an early morning attack on the group home by a man and a woman wearing ski masks and wielding baseball bats and knives. Three of the five teenage girls in the group home were injured and hospitalized. Veronica and another girl hid in the garage and escaped physical injury. Veronica did witness the condition of her friend, who she found lying face down in the bedroom, unconscious and bleeding from the head. The move to the foster family may prove to be positive. The parents appear to be caring and committed and are part of a therapeutic foster care system in which parents participate in special training that goes considerably beyond the usual foster parent preparation.

The other major event was that Olivia became pregnant, decided to keep the baby, and to raise it with childcare support from her mother. She knows that her boyfriend is the father, but it remains to be seen whether he will participate as a father and provide support. Both changes highlight the uncertainty and volatility of these girls' lives. Since I have known them, there have been short periods of stability, but the pattern is that change is the norm.

The analysis in Table 1 (see pages 53–54) attempts to capture some of the major similarities and differences in the girls' background and experiences of the two girls. Despite being necessarily reductive, it shows patterns at a glance that would take many pages to narrate in text.

Coherence and Consistency

Olivia's life is becoming simpler and clearer than Veronica's in some important ways. Olivia's relationship with her mother is basically close and ongoing, even though for the much of the past year she lived with cousins and then her boyfriend's family, not with her mother. Veronica's relationship with her mother is characterized by love and hate, with particular anger directed at her mother for her drug addiction and abandonment of the two girls. During the first four years of my relationship with Veronica, her mother was under treatment for heroin addiction. In many ways her parenting was inconsistent and negligent in that period, though she was able to care for Veronica and her younger sister. However, in 2002 she began a romantic relationship with a man who moved into the apartment. Recently released from prison, he was using heroin and was reported to the police several times for threatening neighbors or Veronica's mother with a knife. Veronica called the police and her grandmother during one of these episodes, leading Child Protective Services (CPS) to remove her and her sister from the mother's home. Unlike a previous CPS removal a year earlier, this one appears to be permanent because to date, the mother remains with the boyfriend and is still reportedly using drugs.

Olivia has never lived with her biological father and has very seldom had contact with him, even long distance. This may cause pain at times, but it is at least clear. There is no back and forth, no uncertainty, no nostalgia for something that existed at one time and is now missed. Veronica, in contrast, lived with her father and mother for the first seven years of her life. She recalls feeling very close to him, riding on his back, admiring his carpentry skills, and feeling proud of his physical abilities and strength. Her mother also told me that he used to take Veronica with him when he panhandled.

Olivia's community reflects her own taken-for-granted self-identification as an African American. Who or what she is ethnically is not an issue. She is only self-consciously aware of ethnic and racialized differences when she spends time with Veronica and me. Our relationship is a border zone in almost every respect. We appear physically different in terms of racialized features and age, and our cross-cultural and class differences add to the borderland qualities. For instance,

when we are in my car together, we usually listen to the radio, sometimes their choices, and other times mine. In this way, we educate one another about what we like, who is cool now in their particular niche of the rap and hip-hop world, and why we like what we like. Interestingly, neither of them has entirely stereotyped musical taste. Beyond her preference for rap and hip-hop, Olivia listens to classical music to study and to go to sleep. Veronica likes oldies because they remind her of her mother, and Mexican music ("but not too much") because it reminds her of her grandfather.

Olivia's solid affinity with African Americans contrasts with Veronica's view of herself as "different" from her surrounding social context at home, in her neighborhoods, and at school. She must constantly construct her identity in relation to that context. In her mother's neighborhood, in the group home, and in several previous foster homes (i.e., for some 12 of her 14 years), she was a light-skinned Latina in an African American world, and she was often teased and put down by peers because of this difference. She tried to fit in by getting her hair braided, listening to rap, and by "talking black," but she could not erase the physical differences that matter so much in a racialized society.

Olivia's family has been poor for generations; none of her immediate family members are middle class or working class. Veronica's family exhibits vast socioeconomic contrasts, from the drug-addicted mom and aunt, to the middle-class grandma and great uncle and aunt. She must make sense of her own poverty in relation to the middle-class lifestyles she sees so near to her — and yet so far. To summarize, it appears that consistency and coherence in parenting, ethnic community, and social class are important contextual factors that make Olivia's life less complicated than Veronica's.

Agency

Another emerging difference involves the degree and kind of agency each girl exercises. Olivia has no involvement with CPS. Although she and her family are poor and on welfare (about $300 a month until Olivia turns 18), social workers, judges, or other authorities do not dictate their lives. The decisions they make, for better or worse, are their own. In a particularly tense period during the winter of 2004, I bought bus fare for Olivia and her mother to return to Oakland from Southern California. The next day, I came to take Olivia back to the home of her mother's friend. I became furious when I discovered that her mother had returned to Southern California, leaving 16-year-old Olivia — who had been raped by her cousin only days before down south — in Oakland with a few vague possibilities of places to stay. When I asked the mother why she had left her daughter, she said, "I have some business I need to take care of here. She could have stayed in Southern California until I finish up here, but Olivia do what Olivia want to do!" Olivia's experience with decision-making has increased exponentially in the past months. She moved to Oakland, lived with her boyfriend's family instead of with her own

mother's friend, changed schools, began to earn her own money, and bought a cell phone with bells and whistles, which she later gave up because she could not afford it. Her most recent and weightiest decision was to have a baby, even though its conception was accidental.

In contrast, Veronica is constantly under other people's control. She has no experience in making weighty decisions on her own and has not witnessed her mother doing so. As Veronica has grown older, she has been placed in increasingly restrictive environments in the homes and in school, where she has been labeled severely emotional disturbed (SED). Her socially sanctioned choices involve, for example, choosing a pet fish (once having one was approved); sometimes she chooses what kind of food to eat, or which movie to see. Veronica's decision-making power becomes increasingly curtailed in relation to what should be a gradual, developmentally aligned shift toward more complex and consequential decision-making opportunities.

Others have suggested that young people in oppressive environments use their agency to resist the people and structures that control them. In short, their agency is used in ways that get them into trouble with school authorities, police, etc. (O'Connor, 1997). This explanation applies in Veronica's case, since she curses at other students in school who taunt and curse at her, is sullen and sometimes outright hostile with her teachers, occasionally hits people, and is suspended several times each semester due to "acting out." In spring 2005, her special education teacher described her as "extremely uncooperative," "belligerent," and "disruptive." However, Olivia and her mother actively resist being placed in situations that would curtail their agency. Even when they are homeless and do not have enough to eat, they prefer to stay in a friend's crowded apartment than go to a shelter, where a curfew and other limitations would be imposed.

A Beginning of School Success for Olivia

Three months after the rape and her move back to Oakland, Olivia called me to share the news that she had gotten all A's on her first report card from the charter school she had attended since January. The report included a checklist of good and bad behaviors. All three teachers checked only positive behaviors, notably "demonstrates initiative/self-motivation." They also added brief narrative comments, including "her work is strong, as is her work ethic." "I hope she continues to challenge herself and move forward." "Olivia is a wonderful student and a positive example for others."

This small high school has around 150 students, most of whom have not succeeded in traditional comprehensive high schools and have dropped out for one or more semesters. It offers a combination of classes that enables students to graduate from high school, plus vocational preparation in three areas: clerical, health care, and construction. On Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, students attend academic classes from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 or 6:00 p.m. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, they either

attend job preparation workshops or work at job sites for pay. Earlier, Olivia had attended a comprehensive high school with over 4,000 students, but she dropped out when her mother decided to visit family in Southern California for about six months. During that time, Olivia did not attend school at all. At the new charter school, however, she has been attending regularly.

This school is helping Olivia to achieve success, as her two good report cards, regular attendance, and motivation to get her high school degree attest. As for the reason she succeeded in this school, she said: "I can concentrate." In the comprehensive high school she had attended earlier, the many distractions from other students prevented her from concentrating. In addition, she believed her English, Math, and Social Studies teachers in the new school were good. Due to her interest in history, the Social Studies teacher was her favorite. Beyond the tight schedule of academic subjects, the Tuesday and Thursday schedule of work preparation and work experience motivates Olivia, giving her realistic hope that she will find work that provides a sense of dignity.

The Spread of Olivia's Agency

Olivia's ability to make important decisions and choices for herself now extends to decision-making for the benefit of her younger friend Veronica. Olivia knows that Veronica's separation from her mother and the imminent loss of her younger sister to an adoptive family has shattered her life. She also knows that she has much in common with Veronica (e.g., poverty, homelessness, violence in the environment, etc.), and that her similar history and older status create a bond that allows Veronica to listen to her advice. Olivia relates to Veronica as a friend and older sister. Each considers the other a "sister" because they share the same "big sister." Upon hearing about Veronica's behavioral problems in school, Olivia said to me, "I need to talk to her" — and she did so on several occasions.

In May 2005, alarmed and frustrated by the increasing problem of Veronica's behavior at school, Veronica's grandmother exerted her own agency and put Veronica on "lockdown." She told Veronica that she would have no family visits (including me) for at least a month, and that she would not be able to attend the annual family trip to the Russian River in July, an event that Veronica anticipates with great joy each year as it also includes her birthday. The grandmother also spoke to the group home director, who agreed to withhold any "fun" activities such as movies or other outings.

In response to the "lockdown," I organized a meeting at my house of Veronica's grandmother, aunt, and uncle to talk about what we can do together to support Veronica more effectively (and, I hoped, to persuade the grandmother to adopt a more supportive action than punitive "lockdown"). When I told Olivia about this meeting, she stated with conviction: "I want to come to that meeting and speak." She said she would talk about how she understands what is going on with Veronica, that she is surrounded by older girls who are often in trouble, and simply wants

to fit in, seeking to do what they do out of peer pressure. Her advice for Veronica was "to be her own person." I urged Olivia to come to the meeting and say these things to the adults, but she failed to appear, stating later that she had forgotten. I was disappointed, but realized that although Olivia is mostly responsible and follows through, she is still learning.

Discussion

Whatever else happens in the ongoing lives of these two girls, Olivia is developing a sense of agency that is self-perpetuating and reaches beyond her own life. When she exercises her agency, she is aware that, for better or worse, she affects the world around her and that these choices affect her and potentially others as well. It is impossible to isolate the influences that promoted the development of Olivia's sense of agency. The facilitating factors cited would probably include the small school, the mentoring relationship with me, the natural developmental process, or perhaps Olivia's resiliency and innate predisposition toward being smart and capable of taking advantage of whatever supports she finds. I suspect all of these are true to some extent. Her agency in deciding to have a baby will surely compromise many of her gains and goals, making it difficult, if not impossible, for her to graduate from high school, find decent work, and attend college.

Similarly, Veronica's increasingly restrictive environment may shift now that she is in a new foster home. Until now, her environment has differed greatly from Olivia's when it comes to fostering a positive sense of agency. The structural constraints imposed on her and her mother have left an indelible mark on her capacity to "intentionally identify and implement alternatives" (Mirón and Lauria, 1998: 189), hindering her ability to develop her agency in ways that will promote her own well-being. The social structures that control her life, primarily Child Protective Services and, more recently, the Special Education program, have contributed to the creation of a child who assumes that no decision-making role belongs to her. Her role, instead, is to be a victim and to act out in anger, frustration, and retaliation against whoever is closest to her and aggravating her the most at the moment.

Beyond her curtailed and frustrated sense of agency, Veronica must also make sense of and navigate more complex cultural and social borders than does Olivia. Some theorizing about cultural borderlands (Bhabha, 1994; Rosaldo, 1989) suggests that in the spaces where cultures and differences of all kinds overlap, meet, and mingle, there is room for innovation, change, creativity, and insurgency:

> The borderline work of culture demands an encounter with "newness" that is not part of the continuum of past and present. It creates a sense of the new as an insurgent act of cultural translation.... It is the space of intervention emerging in the cultural interstices that introduces creative invention into existence (Bhabha, 1994: 7–9).

I agree that such spaces can become sites of positive and creative cultural production, and that individuals can grow strong in their cultural hybridity, but Veronica's case makes me question whether an individual can have too many borderlands and not enough support to make sense of this complexity. Olivia might have just enough borderland experience to make it useful to her, whereas Veronica lives entirely in the borders and lacks the explicit support that could help her to see her own hybridity as a strength.

Suggestions for Educational Practice and Policy

If we assume that Olivia's growing sense of agency is a positive force in her life, and that limited agency is one of many negative forces in Veronica's life, how can social institutions such as schools, child protective services, and community organizations encourage rather than discourage it? And how can they do so in a way that draws positively on young people's experiences with cultural and social borderlands?

The conceptual framework proposed by Tatum (2001) and adapted by Henze et al. (2002) offers some possibilities. Tatum proposed that to improve race relations in schools, educators need to affirm students' identities, build community, and cultivate student leadership. Later, Henze et al. added a fourth dimension: to address the root causes of conflict.

Two dimensions, affirming identity and cultivating student leadership, emphasize the individual, while the other two emphasize the social and cultural aspects of students' lives. This framework should be "stretched" to encompass the concepts of agency and social borderlands.

How can schools and other social institutions, including Child Protective Services and welfare (as implemented under the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act), include these dimensions in their work with children and youth? Practical innovations will indicate the particulars of how to do it, but any institution that can offer young people gradually increasing experiences with decision-making and taking initiative will be helpful. At first, and especially with very young children, decisions must be limited in scope. As children grow older, they should gain experience with increasingly consequential decisions and be given opportunities to make both bad and good decisions. Educational institutions also need to provide time for reflection before and after important decisions. As John Dewey noted, "we do not learn from our experiences; we learn by reflecting on our experiences."

Lucey (2004) discussed the need for financial education processes that address unequal economic socialization among racialized populations in the U.S. He cited Conley's (2001) study in which it was determined that:

> fourteen percent of the wealth gap between Caucasians and African Americans remained after controlling for socioeconomic and educational

factors, parent wealth, and inheritance, and five years of growth. Con-
cisely, a strong potential for wealth differences could occur over just five
years. It is very possible that differing patterns of financial socialization
in children may explain this…gap (in Lucey, 2004: 32).

Given the pervasive poverty that underlies the problems faced by children like
Veronica and Olivia, it is worth investigating whether schools and other educative
organizations could integrate financial socialization into their curricula, together
with decision-making skills that encourage a greater sense of agency among young
people. Financial education could be one of many concrete ways to engage students
in constructing a positive sense of agency, with the advantage that it could also
give them tools to escape poverty when they grow old enough to manage their
own finances.

Second, schools and other educational institutions need to provide opportuni-
ties for students to read about, discuss, and reflect on their own experiences with
various types of social borderlands that include racialized differences, as well as
gender, class, and other dimensions of difference. By ignoring everything except
monolithic cultural constructs such as "African American culture," "Latino culture,"
and others, we impart an inaccurate message to young people, implying that their
lives should fit easily into one or another of these compartments, when the reality
is much more complex. We need to do a better job of explicitly helping students to
navigate and realize the potential of these rich zones of cultural contact.

At the policy level, one of the problems for children like Veronica is that the
CPS is not an educational institution and therefore cannot, as currently constituted,
take on the kinds of educational tasks suggested above. Liaison work with schools,
therapists, and other educational programs is very spotty due to the overextended
caseload of most CPS social workers. However, school officials do know which
children are in the custody of CPS, and could act upon this knowledge by providing
these children with additional resources in school or after school, including pro-
grams and curricula to help them learn how to make decisions that will help them
rather than harm them, and to support them in their development of a strong sense
of identity amid multiple social borders. Although all students would benefit from
such programs and curricula, it is especially critical to provide them to those whose
lives are the most controlled and the most crisscrossed by multiple borders.

Table 1: Comparison of Background and Experiences

	Olivia	Veronica
Age at time of analysis	16	14
Ethnicity/Identity	Identifies as African American	Identifies as "mixed": ethnically white, Mexican, French, Irish, and socially as Black
SES	Intergenerational poverty	Poverty only in her nuclear family of birth; other family members are middle class.
Mothers' ethnicity	Identifies as African American	Identifies as Chicana
Fathers' ethnicity	African American	European American with Irish ancestry
Ethnic community	Growing up in all African American community	Growing up with mostly Latino/a and African American caretakers and peers
Siblings	O. is youngest of three; brother is drifting; sister lives with boyfriend who sells drugs	V. is middle child of three. Older brother raised by Grandma since age two; younger sister is being adopted by foster family
Experiences with homelessness	Lived in shelters at one point — currently living with her mother's friend	Lived in shelters and on street for about four years
Violence	Experienced physical fights with broken bottles; was raped at age 16 by a 20-year-old cousin	Experienced physical violence in home (mother's boyfriend threatened mother with knife); was raped at age six by a neighbor boy of 17
Drug addiction in family	Mother was addicted but has been clean for several years. Olivia was not exposed in utero	Mother and father addicted to heroine; V. was exposed in utero
Relationship with mother	Still close, but O. does not always live with her mother	V. not allowed to see her mother since 2002
Relationship with father	O. last saw her father in 2001, who has mostly been absent from her life	Father was in household until V. was eight, and made one brief reappearance after that
Child Protective Services	No removal or involvement	V. was removed from mother twice; second time was permanent

(continues on next page)

	Olivia	**Veronica**
Medical	O. is healthy, has positive body image. Pregnant since March 2005	V. is overweight; has poor body image; takes drugs to control aggressive behavior
School	Does well when in positive school environment (i.e., small charter school where she can "concentrate")	Has no history of doing well in school; behavioral acting out, poor concentration; placed in progressively more restrictive environments
Peer relations	Has a 20-year-old boyfriend plus some girlfriends	Relationship with O. is the only strong friendship

NOTE

1.   I have used pseudonyms to protect the confidentiality and privacy of the girls' lives.

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