

PROVIDENCE Journal

Young Lincoln School students talk about sexism in their lives with 'Like a Girl' ad creator

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PROVIDENCE, R.I. — Nine-year-old Abby Hitte got her first taste of sexism on the playground in kindergarten.

“All the boys would play wall ball but they said the girls couldn’t play,” Hitte, of Coventry, said. “They’d be like ‘you’d get hit and you’ll break a bone.’ It wasn’t fair.”

For 10-year-old Imani Belisle it was during a soccer game at a friend’s birthday party. While the boys ran around and kicked the ball the girls were told to “find something else to do.”

“They said you can’t do this with us because you’re a girl,” she said. “It made all the girls feel really delicate, like if you got hit it would be the end of your life.”

Biases like this “feel really bad,” Belisle said.

“You don’t really want people to think of you as weak,” she said. “You want them to think you’re strong... like you’re someone who can do whatever everyone else can do.”

During a visit with documentarian Lauren Greenfield students at the Lincoln School, an all-girls academy, reflected on their experiences with gender inequality, and worked to “prove the boys wrong.”

Greenfield has made headlines recently for her Emmy award-winning **#LikeAGirl commercial** that premiered during the 2015 Super Bowl. In the ad — which Greenfield calls a “social experiment” — interviewees are asked to perform various tasks “like a girl.”

When asked to run like a girl, some flail their arms awkwardly. When asked to hit like a girl, a young boy smacks the air frantically.

The clips bring takes a look at the absurdity of the phrase “like a girl” and seeks to turn the words into a compliment, rather than an insult, Greenfield said.

“I wanted for them to be conscious of the stereotypes so they don’t get disempowered by it,” Greenfield said.

During the talk Greenfield asked the 100 girls, ranging from ages 5 to 11, to share their personal experiences. It was her first time speaking with an audience this young, Greenfield said. The conversation focused mostly on playtime.

“The play piece is really important,” Greenfield said in an interview with the Providence Journal. “For elementary age kids, play is how you learn.”

The children were asked if they were ever told they couldn’t do something because they are female. Hands stretched high, every person in the audience had an example. Some had been told they couldn’t play sports because they’d get hurt, others weren’t allowed to clean up the chairs after an assembly because they “weren’t as strong” as the boys.

“I felt like boys are harder and can get things thrown at them and be fine,” one girl said. “But I felt like a vase you couldn’t touch.”

She added, she felt like glass while the boys felt like steel.

Suzanne Fogarty, the head of school, said she invited Greenfield to talk to promote self confidence in the students. Stereotyping begins early, so should intervention, she said.

“We want them to say ‘I can do this,’” Fogarty said.

The self-awareness of this group was obvious and their eagerness to discuss gender issues was empowering, Greenfield said.

When asked if they thought doing something like a girl was a bad thing, a kindergartener in the front row popped up and shouted a loud “no!”

“It means you can do whatever you want to do,” she said. “And if you can’t do it, at least you tried.”

Greenfield will speak at the school Wednesday at 6:30 p.m. Contact Lincoln School for more information.

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