While girls’ participation in science, technology, engineering and mathematics has increased since the 1990s, girls’ participation continues to lag in some areas and they feel unsure of their abilities in many advanced courses, particularly those that have been traditionally taken more often by boys. The study, *Smart girls, hard-working girls but not yet self-assured girls: The limits of gender equity politics*, conducted by Audrey Dentith, took place in an upper Midwestern suburban high school in the USA. In this school, girls, age 16-18 of mostly white, upper-middle class, enrolled in more challenging coursework, called advanced placement (AP), in large part because of grading incentives. To encourage students to participate, students were rewarded for enrolling in AP courses through an adjustment to the overall weight of the final grade given for each class. A value of .025 was added to students’ semester grade point average (GPA) for each AP course students completed. (Note: grade point average (GPA) is a common form of reporting in American schools similar to percentage averages in Canada). Girls’ participation in AP courses rose from 20 per cent to just over 40 per cent during the four-year period. More girls enrolled in AP courses and they sustained their enrollment over time, while male participation remained the same. Dentith sought to find out why girls’ participation increased and what their experiences were like in these courses. Through discussions with girls enrolled in AP courses, four themes emerged: (1) role of the teacher; (2) pressure to achieve; (3) self-confidence and image; and (4) gender bias.

Role of the Teacher
Girls recognized that a high GPA was important in being accepted to top-ranked universities as well as in establishing social status within the school. When selecting which AP courses to enroll in, girls expressed that the teacher was an important motivator. The teachers’ abilities to teach, their support of students, and teachers’ approachability and personality were powerful incentives for girls. Of particular importance was the nature of the relationship between student and teacher; girls were drawn to teachers who were supportive and approachable.

The Pressure to Achieve
The pressure to achieve was also identified in understanding why girls chose more difficult courses. Girls who had previously achieved a high GPA felt pressured to enroll in newly weighted AP courses to ensure that their GPA would remain high. As Dentith notes, weighted GPA acted as a negative incentive when girls enrolled in AP courses not because of the increased possibilities, like university admission or elevated social status, but out of a pressure to remain at the top of the class. If the girls did not enroll in weighted AP courses, other girls who did may have surpassed them thus jeopardizing their position; this was especially true of girls who had previously been at the top of the class before weighted GPA was introduced. These pressures created a sense of resentment amongst the girls.

What is an AP class?
The College Board’s® Advanced Placement Program® enables students to pursue college-level studies while still in high school. Thirty-seven courses and exams in 22 subject areas are offered. Based on their performance on rigorous AP Exams, students can earn credit, advanced placement, or both, for college.

1 For public release May 2009
Gender Bias

Experiences of gender bias were also described by the girls. As a result, girls tended to focus their efforts inward to change themselves rather than outward to change the gender structures that surround and limit them. Individual changes consisted mainly of higher goals for their individual success and more self-imposed rigor and discipline, but little expectation of social change. They knew they could not afford to take as much for granted as their male counterparts. They needed to work harder because they were girls. One of the most compelling findings was the revelation made by several girls that they viewed themselves to be in competition with other females, not with the males in their classes. These young women defended their need to compete with one another for the finite number of spaces allocated for them in these male-dominated classrooms.

The results of Dentith's research indicate that these girls had high expectation for themselves and worked furiously to fit into an already established system. They were reluctant to share their accomplishments with others and held fast to the importance of GPA as a predictor of success. Despite their readiness to identify the unfairness of gender roles and norms, they willingly participated in a patriarchic model that favors fierce individualism, competition, and personal entitlement. Though issues of race and class were not subject of this study, it is important to note the site of the study has 13% students of color, but only one student of color was identified by the school as enrolled in an AP course. This raises much concern about the absence of students of color in AP courses, although the focus here is on girls, it is clear that exclusionary practices are evident.

Self-confidence and Image

Problems of self-image and overall diminished confidence were prominent. Girls expressed concern about their confidence in their academic abilities, and felt that boys were much more confident. These expressions of doubt were particularly true for those classes that typically had fewer female participants such as advanced physics, chemistry, and computer science. Insecurities were expressed in a number of ways; some girls focused on the need to bolster their skills and prepare for the rigours of college work, although they knew they were ranked among the top achievers in the entire state. Others expressed apprehension about their future college studies and shared strong compulsions to study harder, challenging themselves to achieve more. Girls demonstrated a stronger need to be perceived as successful and competent by their peers and teachers. They worked hard to look intelligent by selecting courses carefully and working extra hard to succeed in them.