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Learning in Action

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Facilitating Smart-Girl: Feminist Pedagogy in Service Learning in Action

RHONDA L. WILLIAMS AND ABBY L. FERBER

Introduction

Although feminist theories and practices are wide-ranging and diverse, feminist pedagogies share a commitment to creating change to improve women's lives. As feminist faculty members, part of our goal in teaching is to empower our students to work for change (Luke and Gore 19). We teach not only to educate our students, but also to enable them to use this knowledge to work for social justice. In many courses, students learn about social problems, institutional inequality, and barriers facing women; this subject matter, however, frequently leaves students feeling depressed and defeated. Too often, students leave class not knowing how to apply their newfound insights. Knowledge gained in the university classroom is often disconnected from action and from the practices of women working for change in the community. Finding ways to connect students to the process of change is an ongoing struggle for many educators. Opportunities for internships or community service/learning are increasingly employed in feminist classrooms, so that

students can connect what they are learning and theorizing to the world beyond the classroom.

This article discusses an innovative program, Smart-Girl, developed in collaboration among feminist scholars, educators, and business women concerned with intervening in and improving the lives of adolescent girls in their community. This program is unique not only in its success, but also in the social and emotional impact it has had on the high school and college women who work as group facilitators (mentors) with this program. Smart-Girl is a flexible model for feminist service learning that can be adapted to a wide range of disciplines and courses. The program incorporates the four components of feminist research and pedagogy, as discussed in the introduction to this volume: reflexivity, action orientation, attention to affective components, and use of the situation at hand (Fonow and Cook).

The authors are faculty members at the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs (UCCS), where we have started a very successful Smart-Girl Program, now in its fourth year. Both authors are also cur-

rently members of the Board of Directors of the nonprofit, grassroots, Smart-Girl organization. Williams contributed to the curriculum, teaches the training course for guides, and supervises a number of programs; Ferber supervises the community service and learning course and coordinates the program through the Women's Studies Program. We have discovered that the program has a profound impact on the group facilitators as well as the youths it serves. Smart-Girl was not initially created for university women, but the university partnership has been incredibly successful and is now being replicated on a number of other campuses. The authors come from very different disciplinary backgrounds—Williams in school counseling and Ferber in sociology and women's studies. The Smart-Girl Program, however, has fostered collaboration between our disciplines as well as among our students. The flexibility of the Smart-Girl Program, and its relevance to all college women, allows it to be tied to almost any field of study. University women from fields as diverse as nursing, communications, education, sociology, and engineering have participated in this program by registering for our women's studies Community Service and Learning course for elective credits and conducting their internship for the class with Smart-Girl. Currently, on other campuses, the program is being initiated by faculty in the fields of psychology, social work, and public administration.

This article will review the critical issues facing girls while introducing this research-based, service-learning program. Smart-Girl combines a mentorship based pedagogy with an interactive, developmentally-appropriate curriculum for developing life skills. This innovative

program provides a promising model for gender-specific, mentor-led support to help adolescent girls, as well as college women volunteers, learn communication and problem solving skills to make effective life choices. Further, we examine the way this model of feminist pedagogy and empowerment can be replicated on other campuses.

When the components of small group interaction and experientially based curriculum are integrated into a mentor-led program model like Smart-Girl, the effect on participants' self-esteem and social skills development is encouraging. The multi-layered curriculum mixed with a multi-level educational component offers a powerful teaching schema in which adults and near-peers are trained to facilitate groups of adolescent girls. Through an interactive training course, facilitators learn and replicate the activities they will then facilitate for the adolescent Smart-Girl participants. In the Smart-Girl sessions, young girls learn from college women, while these college women report that they learn just as much from each other and the young girls with whom they work.

Research results from pre and post surveys indicate significant differences in skills development of Smart-Girl participants as measured against a comparison group not involved in the Smart-Girl program. The specific areas demonstrating the most growth include problem solving/critical thinking, emotional intelligence, resilience, conflict resolution, and refusal skills. Anti-bullying behaviors also showed a significant improvement from the pre to post tests. While the evaluation research continues, the initial results are promising.

Background: Why Smart-Girl?

Alarming statistics from the National Institute of Mental Health indicate that one in five young people has a diagnosable mental illness, and suicide is the third leading cause of death among teens. Michelle Meadows found that from 1993 to 2005, the proportion of students abusing painkillers such as Percocet, Vicodin, and OxyContin rose 300 percent. These problems are far more likely to plague adolescent girls than boys. In fact, by ages fourteen to fifteen, girls are twice as likely as boys to suffer depression (Steese et al.). Social pressures that impact girls' self-esteem also affect their mental health. Body image and perceived appearance is one of the strongest predictors of self-esteem in adolescent girls (Adams 217–19; Harter and Gehrke 17). Peggy Orenstein found that up to 50 percent of nine-year-olds have already dieted (99). Further, "Some of the underlying issues that are associated with an eating disorder include low self-esteem, depression, feelings of loss of control, feelings of worthlessness, identity concerns, family communication problems and an inability to cope with emotions. The practice of an eating disorder may be an expression of something that the eating disordered individual has found no other way of expressing" (Rader Programs). We also know that 90 to 95 percent of anorexia nervosa sufferers are girls and women; anorexia typically appears in early to mid-adolescence; and it has one of the highest death rates of any mental health condition (National Eating Disorders Association).

According to the American Psychological Association's Task Force on Sexualization of Girls, today's media is girl-toxic. It cele-

brates violence against women and accords them status primarily for their value to men (Jacob). Girls internalize the media's images and messages (Roberts). A study of one teen adolescent magazine over the course of twenty years found that in articles about fitness or exercise, 74 percent cited "to become more attractive" as a reason to start exercising. Another study of 4,294 network television commercials revealed that 1 out of every 3.8 commercials sends some sort of "attractiveness message," telling viewers what is or is not attractive, so that the average adolescent sees over 5,260 "attractiveness messages" per year (National Eating Disorders Association). Furthermore, preteens are at the age most vulnerable to media and celebrity influence (Deveny and Kelley). Equating femininity with sex appeal, to the exclusion of other characteristics, significantly limits girls' happiness, independent thinking, safety, and movement in the world.

Issues of sexuality are potentially problematic for girls at this age as well. The American Association of University Women reports that 84 percent of adolescent girls have been sexually harassed, and 89 percent of teen girls say they have felt pressured to have sex (12). Of sexually active adolescent girls age fifteen to seventeen, one in four reports engaging in oral sex to avoid intercourse, and 84 percent of girls believe that girls will lose their boyfriend if they are unwilling to have sex (Sociologists for Women in Society). Girls feel a lack of control over their sexuality, and after menarche learn to see their bodies as a source of shame and disgust rather than pleasure (Leroy). In her interview research, Margaret Leroy found that as they enter puberty, girls learn to hate their bodies.

Issues such as body image, relation-

ships, bullying, gender socialization, and poor decision making are more concentrated during this critical developmental period than at any other time in a young girl's life. According to Mary Polce-Lynch et al., girls report having lower self-esteem than boys during early adolescence (1027). This fragile perception of self takes a downward tumble during middle school years. Self-esteem tends to be the measuring stick for young girls' rite of passage through adolescence (Pipher 258; Polce-Lynch et al. 1025; Simmons 159). Craig W. LeCroy and Jan Daley note: "When self-esteem was assessed at ages eight to nine, 60 percent of the girls reported positive feelings about themselves, compared to 67 percent of the boys. However, by ages sixteen to seventeen only 29 percent of the girls felt positive about themselves, compared to 46 percent of the boys" (33). The National Center for Educational Statistics reported that girls have higher self-esteem before entering school than after they graduate (44). We know that self-esteem has an impact on mental health (Polce-Lynch et al.). Clearly, as a society we are not equipping girls to navigate the complex and frequently hostile and misogynist culture they live in, and the consequences can be life-threatening.

This vast body of research has led many feminist scholars and activists to develop programs that intervene in these dangerous patterns. Thus, the Smart-Girl program was conceived. Alma Lantz, with a PhD degree in the psychology of learning, was initially concerned with the disturbing lack of women in science, math, engineering, and technology (STEM) careers. Many scholars have found that girls' interest and involvement in these fields begins to decline in the middle school years, provid-

ing a point of critical intervention (Bell and Norwood). Lantz's research into this issue led her to the conclusion that girls at this age need much more than what is typically offered in programs seeking to increase the number of girls in STEM fields. We cannot address the low number of girls in STEM fields without also examining why girls are plagued by low self-esteem, eating disorders, high rates of depression, and feelings of having little control over their own lives and futures. Research has found that "to be effective, interventions must be grounded in an understanding of the growth and developmental needs of students in grades four through eight, as well as a sound knowledge of educational experiences" (Clewett et al., cited in Bell and Norwood 249). In collaboration with other women dedicated to improving the lives of girls at this crucial developmental stage, Lantz and colleagues created Smart-Girl to inspire "middle school girls to make smart choices and become confident, capable, self-reliant young women."

Smart-Girl as Feminist Pedagogy

Smart-Girl is modeled upon feminist pedagogical techniques. Like the consciousness-raising groups of the early second wave women's movement, Smart-Girl utilizes small groups of girls coupled with near-peer facilitators, providing a safe environment where they can learn from each other over time. Smart-Girl, as a feminist pedagogy, is "concerned with what is taught, how it is taught and how it is learned" (Kenway and Modra 140).

Over time, as relationships develop, trust is created in the groups, across differences in age, class, and race/ethnicity. Participants learn to work together

in collaboration rather than in competition. This group dynamic allows the girls to reflect on their own lives and develop greater self-awareness while supporting and empathizing with other members of the group. The goal of Smart-Girl, to develop critical thinking and problem solving skills, is accomplished through the group interactions where the participants discover their own answers to questions through the guidance of the group facilitators. This program utilizes the power of mentoring in a non-hierarchical environment. The “guides,” who are high school and college age mentors, are not there to “teach” the girls; rather, their role is to facilitate the group process so that the girls learn from each other and look to themselves for answers. Guides never give answers or tell the girls what to do. Participants learn from their experiences to question assumptions and to solve problems in a more effective manner. They learn to become intentional in their communication, decision-making, and goal setting. As a feminist organization, Smart-Girl trusts that girls can make smart decisions for themselves if they feel valued and self-confident and if they have the requisite skills and tools.

In a society characterized by tremendous gender inequality (as well as other forms of inequality, including race/ethnic, ability/disability, etc.), girls learn very quickly that the feminine is devalued in our culture (McKee and Stone). Nevertheless, “human actors do not merely absorb and reflect cultural patterns from external sources; they participate in cultural constructions of their own” (McKee and Stone 175). Smart-Girl intervenes to support and guide girls to construct their own positive ideals of what it means to be a

girl/woman. Girls will not grow up to be successful, fulfilled, and independent adults, nor will they become proactive women committed to creating positive social change in the world, unless they are encouraged to see themselves as capable and valuable and to develop self-confidence and resiliency.

Smart-Girl Program Description

The Smart-Girl program has served over twelve hundred middle school girls in Colorado since 2000.¹ Most programs are non-fee based, and the Smart-Girl organization or site offering the program (for example, Boys and Girls Club; YMCA; UCCS) covers the minimal costs involved (staff time, supplies). A small number of sites offer Smart-Girl as an after-school program or as day camps. Each program operated by Smart-Girl insures that every girl can participate, regardless of cost. Smart-Girl supports its programs largely through grants and private donations.² Smart-Girl’s goal is to make the program available nationally for schools, universities, and organizations to reach as many girls as possible.

Smart-Girl guides (mentors) work with small groups of approximately twelve to fifteen middle school girls through a thirty- to sixty-hour curriculum. The Smart-Girl curriculum is based on current research about mentorship-led prevention, developmental learning, gender inequality, and gender strengths. Each group has its own adult “coach” as well. At UCCS, coaches are usually graduate counseling interns. Participants benefit from having university women as role models, and the university women have the opportunity to use their education and life experiences to make a positive impact on these young girls. The

coaches provide support and supervision for the guides in preparing for the weekly sessions. While they may also participate in the group facilitation, the coaches assist with group dynamics, guides' concerns, and debriefing of the activities.

Through the curriculum, participants examine some of the specific issues most pertinent to adolescent girls' lives today, including female bullying, sexual harassment, friendship conflicts, body image, media and stereotypes, and peer pressure. In addition to focusing on specific issues such as these, the curriculum is built entirely around teaching key life skills: evaluating options and problem solving, effective communication skills, critical thinking, conflict resolution, leadership, risk taking, empathy, and cultural competency. The learning tools used in the curriculum were designed with input from middle school and high school girls, school counselors, and interdisciplinary educators. The Smart-Girl Program does not teach any specific set of values or answers; instead, the goal is to empower girls with the self-esteem and resiliency, as well as skills and strategies, required to produce thoughtful and intentional patterns of decision making and action.

Smart-Girl helps girls learn and practice problem solving and refusal skills so that they will be equipped to make decisions for themselves and more effectively respond to difficult peer pressure in a way that helps them maintain positive friendships and relationships. For example, we know from the research that many girls feel pressured into engaging in unwanted sexual activity. In Smart-Girl, they learn and practice the skills that will enable them to exert more control over their lives and act in concert with their own desires and goals, rather than peer pressure.

Research-Based Key Components of Smart-Girl

Each of these characteristics directly benefits not only the adolescent girls participating in Smart-Girl, but the guides and coaches as well.

1. SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

Smart-Girl teaches a variety of essential life skills: coping, problem solving, critical thinking, conflict resolution, and communication. Through the Smart-Girl curriculum these skills are taught and practiced in role-plays and skits within small groups. Girls learn and practice specific skills including active listening; asking good questions; empathy; and using "I" statements. Girls also learn the four C's process for more effective problem solving: chill, clarify, consider consequences, and choose.

Although developmentally it is appropriate for young people to attempt to increase autonomy, adolescents' fears and concerns are often the basis for unhealthy decision making. As Stephen A. Rollin et al. report, teaching effective coping skills to adolescents is a method of strengthening the ego that helps them utilize the concept of "inner self" as opposed to relying on destructive strategies (404).

Christopher J. Recklitis and Gil G. Noam found that effective coping skills play a major role in developing protective factors and resilience for young people. Through the use of healthy coping skills, adolescents make more appropriate decisions in difficult situations (89). One of the favorite activities of both girls and guides is the "Worry Box." In this activity girls can anonymously write about any concerns they might be struggling with. The first task for the group is to offer empathy for how the

person who wrote this might be feeling. This enhances small group interaction and allows the girls to build healthy relationships, which can often be one of the most difficult issues that adolescents face. From this empathy, the group provides support to the anonymous person and brainstorms various ideas for how to resolve the problem. As part of this problem-solving process, the girls learn the importance of considering various options as well as consequences.

2. EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

A major component of the Smart-Girl program is the utilization of experiential learning. Developmentally, adolescents learn best by doing; therefore, kinesthetic learning is incorporated into all activities (Kovalik and Olsen). Concrete thinking characterizes this developmental stage. Therefore, topics like problem solving, refusal skills, and conflict resolution utilize specific, concrete step-by-step processes. The participants practice the specifically taught skills through a range of fun activities, as well as role-plays, skits, and demonstrations. The more ingrained the steps become, the more easily they can be applied to daily life.

Developmentally, research supports that adolescents learn better through a kinesthetic modality than through a lecture style. As a result, all of the Smart-Girl sessions incorporate activities that reinforce the specific topic for that session. For example, participants are introduced to effective communication skills through an activity called "Alligators." This activity requires that a group of ten to twelve girls stand shoulder to shoulder in a line. Masking tape is placed very close to their toes and their heels. As the tape encloses them into very close quarters the girls are

then asked to arrange themselves by tallest to shortest without touching the line or stepping outside of the line. Through laughter and many mistakes, they repeat the task until they find the best way to effectively communicate to solve the task. Thus, they learn by doing.

3. DEBRIEFING

The value of activities such as the one above is reinforced by a debriefing immediately following the activity. In the debriefing, the participants discuss what just happened in the activity. They can evaluate how effective their communication was and what they might have done differently. Most importantly, they discuss how they might apply this new learning to their everyday lives. The intention of the debriefing is to develop a clear understanding of how the activity and the lessons can be applied to their own lives. While the debriefing ties the activity and personal learning together, this often elicits a discussion of personal issues for the girls in the group. It is from debriefing that most of the integration of learning takes place.

After each Smart-Girl session ends, the guides and coaches then engage in their own debriefing session. They provide each other with support and feedback, share concerns, and discuss effective facilitation methods. In this way, the guides and coaches also learn from each other and experience the same kinds of supportive, safe, trusting environment that they have developed for the adolescent participants to engage in. Here the guides and coaches mentor each other, and it can be extremely empowering for a guide to realize that she can help another guide deal with some particularly difficult issue she faces in her group. The learning relationships here

are nonhierarchical and nonjudgmental. Although the Smart-Girl program does not provide answers, it does provide a feminist space and methodological approach where girls and women work together and learn from each other regarding issues and topics of central importance to their lives.

4. DIVERSITY AND MULTICULTURAL AWARENESS

Experiential activities are also mechanisms for implementing culturally responsive knowledge, skills, and attitudes into the group setting. As Joseph G. Ponterotto, Shawn O. Utsey, and Paul B. Pedersen note: “Multicultural scholars agree that the most effective learning tool when it comes to increasing multicultural awareness and sensitivity is experiential learning” (176). Creating a sensory experience is a necessity for understanding, and if adolescents hold misconceptions, it takes large amounts of “new sensory input to rewire the brain” (Kovalik & Olsen 114). Therefore, experiential activities can be powerful tools for promoting cultural sensitivity and empathy. Many of the activities utilized in the Smart-Girl program are facilitated to incorporate understanding of race and class inequality and cultural awareness. For example, in the “Someone Like Me” activity, much like in musical chairs, a girl stands in the middle of a circle of chairs and says: “I am looking for someone, someone like me, who . . . (example: *likes ice cream*).” Those who also like ice cream then quickly run to another spot within the circle that has an empty chair. The girl who did not find a chair must then go to the middle and repeat the statement with a new “someone like me, who likes . . .” After a few rounds, the guide can bring in cultural differences, if participants have not already

done so. She might say, “I am looking for someone, someone like me who doesn’t celebrate Christmas.” Throughout the activity, the girls see the many ways in which they are similar to and different from one another.

As in all activities, the knowledge and learning comes in the debriefing. Questions can then be raised about what it was like to find someone who was similar to you: Were you able to find someone in the group with whom you shared something in common? How did it feel when no one else shared your identity? What new things did you learn about members in this group? What stereotypes were dispelled? The power of this new knowledge of cultural awareness contributes to the entire group’s cultural responsiveness. The integration of cultural awareness into many of the activities not only impacts the participants’ awareness, but also the awareness and cultural competency of the guides and coaches.

The other key components of the Smart-Girl program structure are also essential to prejudice reduction and greater cultural awareness. A body of research confirms a refined contact hypothesis: when a diverse group of people work together toward a shared goal in a setting where they have equal status, prejudice is reduced and stereotypes debunked. Smart-Girl groups are consciously constructed by program directors to be ethnically and socio-economically diverse (although this may be limited by the demographics of the specific location of a program). In the group setting, ground rules and other activities ensure that each member of the group has equal status, and the group works together week after week to accomplish various cooperative goals.

Finally, critical thinking skills are essential to prejudice reduction: "Cognitively sophisticated children are less likely to become prejudiced adolescents and adults than are children who 'think' simply and unquestioningly" (Ponterotto, Utsey, and Pederson 173).

5. FRIENDSHIPS' AND RELATIONSHIPS' INFLUENCE ON SELF-ESTEEM

Adolescent relationships have been shown to have a major influence on girls' social development, which ultimately impacts their self-esteem (Simmons 201–33). While friendships may be just as important for boys as for girls, research suggests that "boys and girls may differ in their preferred pathway to intimacy" (Cassidy 43). Rachel Simmons points out that young girls perceive societal isolation as highly negative (70). Girls have been found to manage social relationships very differently from boys (Sax 55). LeCroy and Daley argue that "Adolescent females may be more dependent upon others for development of personal identity, thus, stress within their social network is potentially a source of greater disruption to self-esteem" (39). These authors also suggest that helping young girls develop a more positive self-perception must be done by directly teaching coping skills and instructing the girls to redefine love, acceptance, and themselves in a realistic way.

Since relationships and acceptance are so consuming, the suggestion of exclusion from a friendship group can be used as a weapon (Polce-Lynch et al. 13; Simmons 33–43; Wiseman 98). Relational aggression is defined as harming others by damaging or threatening to damage a relationship through acceptance or exclu-

sion of friendship (Bjorkqvist, Lagerspetz, and Kaukianinen 118; Simmons 33–43). This form of bullying is most common among girls and women. Simmons notes, "Relationally aggressive behavior is ignoring someone to punish them or get one's own way, excluding someone socially for revenge, using negative body language or facial expressions, sabotaging someone else's relationships, or threatening to end a relationship unless the friend agrees to a request" (21).

Smart-Girl draws strength from the importance of relationships to girls and women by fostering trust and bonding within the small groups over the course of the program, as well as developing strong bonds among the guides working together to lead their group. As one guide wrote in her journal: "When I first signed up to do this I was really nervous. I didn't know if the girls would take me seriously, or for that matter if they would see right through me. It doesn't seem that way to me now though. I talked to the girls, but I had the coordinators and other guides with me to help me figure things out. I felt really supported which was great."

6. INFLUENCE OF SMALL GROUP SUPPORT

By practicing and reinforcing positive small group interaction, adolescents can gain support and build on their perception of self. One of the best interventions in addressing adolescent issues including relational aggression is the use of small group interaction. Small group programs are more effective than individual interventions: "The benefits of small groups are the fostering of better social competencies development within groups, creativity of new insights which were not available through individual work and the

enhancement of social skill development” (Benmark, Chi-Ying Chung, and Siroskey-Sabdo 378). One college woman highlighted this benefit in her journal: “I want to think I’m always mature, honest and responsible but I’m not. Smart-Girl reaffirmed to me that I have my share of flaws . . . I don’t have all the answers, and the fact that I’ve been exposed to ten other people’s experiences for the past twelve weeks has been really rewarding. I need to listen more.”

Students who develop social relationships in mentor-led small groups show improved self-perception and an improvement in attitude and behavior (Bjorkqvist, Lagerspetz, and Kaukianinen 119).

Fred R. Benmark, Rita Chi-Ying Chung, and Linda Siroskey-Sabdo (381) identified that in an era of high-stakes testing there seems to be little time in school settings for social skills development and problem solving. Smart-Girl utilizes the best intervention practices for learning to cope with difficult social issues through small group interaction, as identified by Zipora Shechtman, Orit Bar-El, & Efrat Hadar (204). Studies have shown that students from culturally diverse backgrounds have benefited from culturally responsive groups, while “peer modeling, problem solving and validation also were found to be important in groups” (Shechtman et al. 206; Yauman 131). Single problems such as substance abuse, body image, and social skills issues can be better understood in a group setting where the focus can be directed to positive adolescent development (LeCroy and Daley 37). Benmark et al. found that “the small group concept provides a critical element in the interpersonal process that did not exist in individual counseling” (380).

7. GENDER-SPECIFIC GROUPS

Gender-specific small group interaction with an activity-based curriculum has been shown to positively impact self-esteem (Rothenberg). We know that group effectiveness and group dynamics can be impacted by gender (Sax). Social interactions and relationships are very important to females, while males are less likely to require that type of stimulation (Wiseman 9). Language is also a factor in gender differences (Gurian 45–53). Girls often need to verbally process emotions, and their interactions with other girls are often more intimate and face-to-face. Girls are more likely to make decisions based on how they will impact their relationships with their peers. Regarding group interaction, Simmons argues that boys “stress position and hierarchy [while] girls emphasize the construction of intimacy and connection” (127). Building on this research, gender-specific groups allow for an intimacy that does not occur in mixed gender groups. Further, in a gender-specific group, girls can safely discuss a range of gender issues, including their experiences of sexual harassment and the sexual pressure they often experience. Building trusting relationships in a safe environment allows the participants to share their experiences and concerns without fear of judgment.

There are other benefits to all-girl groups as well. As Janice Streitmatter found, “being in classes with only girls holds benefits for them . . . they encountered fewer distractions to learning, they had all of the teacher’s attention, and they did not need to make a space in a different culture. The culture was theirs” (cited in Bell and Norwood 246). Although few girls or women experience this within their schools, Smart-Girl provides just such a

space. Over time, both the guides and participants grow to appreciate and value this space. Further, in a culture that so consistently devalues females and the feminine, this is a space where girls and women are highly valued and in control. For the many girls and women who return semester after semester, Smart-Girl provides a supportive, single-sex space they may not experience anywhere else in their daily lives.

8. MENTORING

One means of developing a trusting relationship, and thus more positive self-esteem, is through mentorship (Casey and Shores 227). The mentorship relationship impacts the mentee in a powerful way (Rollin et al.). In Smart-Girl, trained guides teach and model healthy coping skills and the utilization of appropriate problem solving, the necessary elements that help adolescents develop into healthy adults. Research overwhelmingly supports mentoring programs as an effective method by which to teach life skills (Casey and Shores 231; Catalano, Loeber, and McKinney 87; LeCroy and Daley 90; Rollin et al. 5). Because of the rapport built between the mentors and mentees, this safe environment and positive role modeling from the mentors enhances the life skills development of the adolescents, having an invaluable impact on participants' self-esteem (LeCroy and Daley 32).

The Smart-Girl program utilizes high school and college women as guides because the girls more readily accept and identify with these near-peers as role models. Adolescent recipients of mentoring regard the emotional guidance and social modeling as the most important aspect of the mentoring experience (Casey and Shores 229). Another impact of mentoring

is that it offers the participants a chance to express opposing views while observing how conflict and debate can be effectively handled (Rollin et al. 404).

As a pedagogical technique, mentoring has a positive effect on social skills, behavior, school attendance, academic achievement, and peer selection, while also helping develop protective factors such as effective coping skills and resiliency. Research also concludes that female mentees report an increase in self-confidence in personal capabilities as a result of mentoring (Catalano, Loeber, and McKinney 204; Rollin et al. 403). Several studies (Casey and Shores 231; Polce-Lynch et al. 14; Sax 247) indicate that mentoring adolescents through these tumultuous times is very successful for both mentees and mentors, as both learn effective life skills. For example, one guide discussed a mask-making activity in her journal. Participants decorate the outside of a mask to reflect the way they believe others see them, while they decorate the insides to reflect who they feel they really are. The college guide wrote:

This is my favorite thing to do with the girls because I feel like it shows you a whole new side to them. I also find it really therapeutic myself. I found out that all of the girls [with one exception] have issues with drugs and alcohol, and that all of them have been in or are currently in abusive relationships, whether it is mental or physical. What was the most amazing thing was that these girls opened up to us, and were so blatantly honest. This was the third day and I was able to get these girls out of their comfort zone, and to look into themselves. It was perhaps the most gratifying thing I have ever done . . . I learned a lot about myself.

As mentors model positive behaviors and help the adolescents learn to solve problems, the mentors also internalize these processes as part of their own life skills development. As reciprocal relationships, mentorship programs have been proven to impact the mentor emotionally, socially, and intellectually.

As Magda Lewis argues, feminist classrooms can potentially provide a “deeply emotional experience for many women, offering the opportunity to claim relevance for the lives they live as the source of legitimate knowledge” (187). The Smart-Girl sessions provide just this kind of space for both the girls and young women. The mentors learn that their own life experiences are a source of knowledge and learning not only for themselves but also for their mentees.

For the college women, this experience is transformative. They see that they can make a difference in the lives of others. As another guide wrote in her journal:

This opportunity improved my outlook on life. Some of my experiences in middle school made me question my sense of self-worth and self-esteem . . . all my friends used to make fun of me because of my weight, development, or attitude and it really took a toll on me. I felt that no one liked me and that my peers did not recognize me for my positive characteristics. So it is important for me to empower these girls because I know that they have potential to be great women . . . These girls became more than participants of the program as weeks went by, they became inspirations to me. Their energy and love for life changed the way that I perceived my life . . . These girls changed my life just as I feel I did for them.

University students’ involvement in this program allows them to move beyond the

consciousness-raising they experience in their coursework to the development of a critical consciousness, where the goal is “enabling people together to transform their reality, rather than merely understand it or adapt to it with less discomfort” (Kenway and Modra 156). Working with Smart-Girl provides our students with an opportunity to get to know an active grassroots organization, created by women working to create change. Exposure to this role model empowers many students to move beyond feelings of hopelessness, to think about how they might be involved in creating change over their lifetime.

The program also fosters horizontal power relations rather than hierarchical ones, a key ingredient in feminist pedagogy (Lewis 1992). The college women are put in the position of teaching and directing the learning process, rather than sitting in a classroom listening to a faculty member. They are directing their own learning and facilitating a circular learning process whereby the girls in their groups are able to learn from them, while they simultaneously learn from the girls and benefit from the dialogue. As one guide wrote in her journal, “I never thought I would learn or could relate to any of these girls but they have taught me a lot and it makes me wish that I would have addressed my challenges at that age a little differently.” Here, both the college women and middle school girls are active agents, empowering themselves and each other. As another student summarized it, “Smart-Girl has changed me as a person. I view things differently.”

Training for Guides and Coaches

On the UCCS campus, guides and coaches are recruited from a variety of disciplines. The Smart-Girl training course counts as

an elective. Participation as a facilitator in the Smart-Girl Program counts as an internship offered as part of the women's studies Community Service and Learning course for three credits (students may also intern at a wide variety of other community sites).

Before they are assigned to work with a group, all Smart-Girl guides and coaches must participate in a twenty-four-hour intensive training course. A new women's studies course entitled Group Facilitation and Leadership was created to offer the training. This service-learning course has also been opened up to other college and high school students, who can enroll through our campuses' extended studies program. Although the training is required for all group facilitators, the program itself can be set up and offered in a variety of ways to suit the needs of the campus, faculty, and students participating.

The training for the guides and coaches includes group facilitation skills, awareness of adolescent developmental issues, and the challenges faced by adolescent girls. Processing and debriefing skills are also interwoven throughout the training. Topics covered include the range of issues addressed by the Smart-Girl curriculum. Required readings focus on the lives of adolescent girls (see syllabus in appendix).

The training course provides extensive leadership and group facilitation skills, which students have found empowering and essential as basic life skills. The Smart-Girl curriculum activities are infused throughout the training to familiarize the participants with the activities. This experience enhances their ability to effectively facilitate the activities during the program, and it allows the guides to benefit directly from participation in these activities.

Students are expected to facilitate a group activity as part of their "practicum,"

with trainers replicating middle school girls' behaviors. The guides and coaches quickly realize how much it takes to facilitate a group of adolescent girls. As one guide reflected after her first experience with the girls: "It felt like I was trying to herd cats! I quickly had to apply all that I learned in training so that the group could work together."

As part of the training, the facilitators are taught to weave multicultural awareness throughout all the activities. According to Derald W. Sue and David Sue (56–64), cultural competency consists of three major components: (a) the attitudes/beliefs component: a culturally competent person is one who is actively in the process of becoming aware of his or her own assumptions about human behavior, values, biases and so on; (b) the knowledge component: a culturally competent person attempts to understand the worldview of those who are culturally different; (c) the skills component: a culturally competent person is in the process of actively developing and practicing appropriate, relevant, and sensitive intervention strategies and skills in working with those who are culturally different.

As Cheryl Moore-Thomas reiterates, multicultural interventions must maximize participants' potential. Additionally, the facilitator must continually work toward multicultural competency by: increasing awareness of one's own culture and the culture of others; refraining from utilizing a cookbook, stereotypical approach to group facilitation; understanding possible stressors for group participants of diverse cultures; and providing student resources that are reflective of a diverse population. Therefore, in the training of the guides and coaches, time is spent examining the ways in which race and ethnic identity and cul-

ture might impact specific activities and discussions. As an example, in the body image session, the participants search for advertisements featuring women. The discussion focuses not only on the negative female body image messages of most ads, but also the ways in which images of women are racialized. Guides can direct the discussion to consider which women are depicted in the ads, the different portrayals based on race, and how this might impact minority adolescents.

Impact of the Program on the Guides and Coaches

Because these guides and coaches had not experienced a program like Smart-Girl when they were growing up, the training impacts them on a very personal level. One guide stated, “this was the best class I have taken. It taught me so much about myself, not to mention what adolescent girls are going through.” These students are able to synthesize their own experiences and use recent theoretical constructs and research on adolescent girls to understand their own lives. As one guide wrote in her journal, “I also benefited from the program in many different ways . . . now that I have been through the program I think of middle school as a learning experience. If it was not for the experiences that I endured through middle school I would have never been the person that I am today and these girls made me realize that.”

The guides learn to value themselves; become more self-reflexive; improve their own communication and problem-solving skills; and gain confidence in their ability to work for social change. Another guide reflects:

I knew when I signed up for this program that I was a little nervous about my shyness . . . and I knew this program would be a challenge . . . A challenge it was, one that I will never regret because I was exposed to so much that I needed to deal with. . . . I've learned more about myself than I have in all my college years. What an eye opener in regards to feelings, behaviors, attitudes, not to mention my feelings about my role as a leader . . . I loved this experience and I think I spread my wings further than I knew I could. Believing in myself is HUGE. . . . This was my mantra. Believe, believe, believe that you have something of value to pass on to others.

As part of their training, the guides and coaches are required to keep a journal each week reflecting on their experience in the program and tying it into their readings, previous coursework, their own lives, etc. The journals provide an ongoing opportunity for reflexivity. The guides and coaches find that the topics the girls bring up in group are often topics they also have some concerns about. Two coaches experienced this at a very deep level, when a consistent topic among the girls in their group was the relationships they had with their fathers. The coaches became aware of the intensity of their own feelings about their fathers. While they were working with the girls to examine their options for action, the coaches realized they had to address their own issues as well. As a result of this new found self-awareness, increased confidence, and communication and problem solving skills, these coaches chose to take the brave initiative of seeking out their absent fathers and began to develop relationships with them. This truly was a life-changing experience for the coaches as well as the girls.

As part of the guides' and coaches' self-reflection and learning they must also write a research paper on a topic of their choice related to the lives of adolescent girls. Surveys were administered at the end of the program to gauge change among the youth after participating in the program. The guides and coaches also meet weekly as a team of group facilitators to plan for each session. These meetings are paramount to effective group facilitation.

Smart-Girl guides and coaches are all women. Men in the service-learning course may select other locations for their internship, and the training course is open to all students, because it provides tools and skills that are relevant for anyone. We have had a number of men participate in the training who are interested in starting a similar program for boys, and are currently working with Smart-Girl to explore this possibility.

Conclusion

Interdisciplinary, interactive, developmentally-appropriate mentor-led programs may arguably be one of the most effective ways to teach valuable social skills and social/emotional intelligence (LeCroy and Daley 98). Combining the proven effectiveness of small group interaction, the practice and role-playing of coping skills, and positive mentorship have been shown to positively impact young girls' self-esteem. Polce-Lynch et al. argue that effective coping skills help young people negotiate the trials and tribulations of life (17). Similarly, Rollin et al. demonstrate that mentorship allows participants to see effective communication and conflict resolution through their interactions with the mentors (404).

The Smart-Girl program has combined all of these effective methods, and as the preliminary research indicates, Smart-Girl is having a positive impact on the adolescent girls as well as the guides.

As one guide concluded in her journal: "I think that if my middle school would have had a program similar to this it would have helped a lot of girls that were going through the same issues . . . we all could have communicated with one another instead of being against each other . . . I can leave this program and school and be confident that these girls will have a good experience and memories of their middle school and be confident that they can do anything they set their minds to."

For college and university campuses interested in starting a Smart-Girl program, its flexibility is a strength. The program can be offered in endless configurations. For example, the program is currently being offered as a summer camp; as an after-school program at middle schools; as an in-school option at middle schools; and on college campuses where girls from various middle schools come to the campus once a week over a semester. The number of sessions offered, as well as the length of each session, is also flexible.

This flexibility allows those starting a program to meet the needs of their particular community, as well as to determine the extent of their involvement. In all of these programs, there are college women serving as guides. Each institution can also decide whether or not to open the program up to high school girls; whether the college guides participate as part of an internship course or through a service component of another course; or whether guides work strictly on a volunteer basis, for academic credit, or for pay. In short,

the program is designed to be as flexible as possible to make it easy for institutions to start up programs in their communities and to best meet the needs of their own local constituents. Smart-Girl provides intensive training, as well as the complete curriculum and guide to implementation, while leaving decisions as to how and where the program will be run to those who will be running it.

Smart-Girl provides the tools for local community organizations, schools, or campuses to create programs that will directly impact girls and women in their community. We have found, on our campus and in our community, that the process of creating a Smart-Girl Program is a community building activity with benefits that go far beyond the program's impact on the girls and women involved. Implementing the Smart-Girl program has brought together faculty, administrators, and students from across the campus, working with middle school and high school students and staff as well as interested members of the community, to create positive social change.³

Many of our students continue to volunteer with Smart-Girl after the course ends, demonstrating for us another benefit of this collaboration: the power this program has to inspire an ongoing commitment among our students to community service. At UCCS, our collaboration with Smart-Girl has helped us to build cross-disciplinary relationships; increase community outreach and linkages with the K-12 community; provide opportunities for our undergraduate and graduate students to gain valuable training and intern with an organization committed to changing girls lives; bring middle school and high school girls from diverse ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds to campus each week; con-

nect theory and practice for our students; and affirm our commitment to feminist pedagogy and social change.

NOTES

1. Although Smart-Girl aims to serve all girls, we especially target underserved communities: 73 percent of girls served are from low-income families and qualify for free or reduced fee school lunches. Smart-Girl also serves an ethnically diverse range of girls, with 4.2 percent self-identifying as African-American; Asian-American 8.3 percent; Hispanic 12.5 percent; Multi-racial 16.7 percent; and Caucasian 58.3 percent.

2. As part of an internship course, the women's studies program does not examine the funding sources for each organization where students intern. Our goal, instead, is to make sure the organizations will provide our students with the kind of learning experience the course promises. As Smart-Girl Board members, we are both directly involved in issues of funding and grant writing and are able to provide input into this process (more input than we are able to provide at the university!).

3. More information and contact information for campuses interested in discussing the possibility of starting a Smart-Girl Program can be found online at www.smart-girl.org.

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APPENDIX

Syllabus

The Reflective Educator: Answering the Call, Honoring the Commitment
Smart-Girl Leadership Training

Women's Studies 390
Fall 2007

Assistant Professor: Rhonda Williams,
Ed.D, LPC, NCC

E-Mail: rwilliam@uccs.edu

Office: 262-4167

Office Hours: Monday 3:00-5:00

Tues & Wed: 2:00-4:00

Call for appointment at 262-4120

Prerequisites: None

Course Hours: 2 semester hours

Required Reading:

Smart-Girl Curriculum; Youth Development
Leadership Guide; The Smart-Story.

Recommended Readings:

Simmons, R. (2002). *Odd Girl Out: The
Hidden Culture of Aggression in Girls*.
New York: Harcourt.

Wiseman, R (2002). *Queen Bees & Wan-
nabees: Helping your Daughter Survive
Cliques, Gossip, Boyfriends and other
Realities*. New York: Crown.

Wiseman, R., and E. Rapoport, eds.
(2006). *Queen Bee Moms and Kingpin
Dads: Dealing with Parents, Teachers,
Coaches and Counselors Who Can Make
or Break Your Child's Future*. New York:
Crown.

Suggested Readings:

Carroll, Rebecca. (1997). *Sugar in the Raw:
Voices of Young Black Girls in America*.
New York: Three Rivers Press.

Jacob, Iris, ed. (2002). *My Sisters' Voices:
Teenage Girls of Color Speak Out*. New
York: Owl Books.

The following suggestions are published
by Youth Communication. For more
information visit www.youthcomm.org.

*Different But Equal: Teens Write About Dis-
abilities*, 2005.

*Things Get Hectic: Teens Write About the
Violence That Surrounds Them*, 2d ed.
2006.

*Starting With "I": Personal Essays by Teen-
agers*, 1997.

*Growing Up Asian: Teens Write About
Asian-American Identity*, 2005.

*Growing Up Black: Teens Write About Afri-
can American Identity*, 2005.

Nature of Course: Elective undergraduate
course

Course Format: Experiential, Interactive,
Discussion, and field hours

Course Overview:

This course is designed to provide the
student with information, knowledge, and
skills regarding the Smart-Girl program.
This course will prepare students to imple-
ment the activities and structure for an
effective Smart-Girl program. Students
will receive twenty-seven hours of train-
ing in the program management, goals,
and focus of the program, as well as group
facilitation. Students will be expected to
complete a practicum session at the end
of the training program to evaluate the
skills of their group facilitator and knowl-
edge of the curriculum.

Course Objectives:

1. Understand the goals and intent of the Smart-Girl program.
2. Develop knowledge of developmental issue of middle school girls.
3. Demonstrate skills to facilitate an effective developmental middle school group.
4. Utilize a variety of strategies to assist middle school girls.
5. Implement the Smart-Girl curriculum and activities in a small group setting.
6. Understand the current issues and concerns of middle school girls.

The training will prepare students with the knowledge and skills necessary to initiate a Smart-Girl program. **The internship will be completed** through actual group facilitation of the Smart-Girl curriculum for 12 sessions in one semester. **The student will be supervised by** an on-site coach (supervisor) who has participated as a guide or coach in previous Smart-Girl programs.

The student will become familiar with the variety of activities of the Smart-Girl curriculum. Students will co-facilitate a small group of middle school girls in the Smart-Girl program.

Diversity Statement:

Faculty in the College of Education are committed to preparing students to recognize, appreciate, and support diversity in all forms—including ethnic, cultural, religious, gender, economic, physical, and intellectual—while striving to provide fair and equitable treatment and considerations for all. This professor intends to treat all students fairly and equitably regardless. Any student who believes that he/she has not been treated fairly or equitably for any reason should bring it to the attention of the professor.

Students with Disabilities:

The professor will make reasonable accommodations for students who have a documented problem that interferes with successfully completing this course. It is your responsibility to request a modification(s) before assignments are due. If you are in need of a modification(s) or an accommodation(s), please contact the Disability Services office to utilize University-wide student assistance programs and to obtain a certification letter.

Ethical Code of Conduct:

The responsibility for ethical conduct, academic honesty, and integrity rests with each individual member of the academic community. The Academic Honor Code outlines the standards of academic honesty that are followed in this class.

Smart-Girl Training Requirements:

- A. Participants will read selected resources prior to training
- B. Participants will attend all sessions of the Smart-Girl training
- C. Participants will be actively involved in all activities and discussions presented in the workshop
- D. Participants will become familiar with the Smart-Girl curriculum
- E. Participants will choose one of the activities from the Smart-Girl curriculum to present at completion of the practicum experience.
- F. Participants will sign a Smart-Girl guide contract committing to abiding by the expectations of the program.
- G. Participants will pass the written exam following the completion of the training session.

Schedule: The times provided are guidelines.

Friday, 4:00–8:00 pm

Check In; Create guidelines/groundrules; participate in various activities; cultural competency discussion and activities; racial/ethnic identity and privilege; closure.

Saturday, 8:00 am–4:00 pm

Expectations of guides and coaches; communication skills; introduction and participation in specific SG activities; group

facilitation skills & debrief skills; sexual harassment; sex education; role plays.

Sunday, 8:00 am–4:00 pm

Review of debrief skills; body image; media images; bullying and bully proofing activity; handling nonparticipation/silent

members, cliques within the group, needy person, over-talker, chaos, and resistance; refusal skills training and role plays.

Monday, 4:00–8:00 pm

Group practicum presentation activities.