

Doing Just Fine? Giving Attention to the Needs and Interests of Girls?

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Abstract: This article is an exploration of schooling, culture and the socialization of girls, all of which demand our critical thought if we are to address the needs of young females. The requirement for continued attention to girls is considered, followed by one possible avenue to address the needs of young females - mentorship programs. Here the purpose and goals of mentorship programs will be discussed. Finally, consideration is given to a diverse student population and how “girl issues” manifest in different ways.

Why Focus On Girls?

It was following the January 2010 launch of the mentorship program *Young Women on the Move* (YWM)¹ in the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) that a reporter asked “Why a girl’s group?” In fact, this is a rather common question whenever work with young women is discussed. I suppose this is a fair question given that girls are often portrayed as routinely outperforming the boys in academics, suspended less in public schools, underrepresented in special education programs, applying to post secondary institutions at a higher rate, and having the same rights as males in a “gender-neutral” Canada. Based on this image it would appear that girls are “doing just fine” and that the need for a focus on girls is marginal at best. However, a critical examination of the state of girls paints quite a different picture; an image materializes that does not support the “doing just fine” depiction. The Toronto Star revealed this contradiction with the February 23, 2010 headline, “Women’s Rights in Decline”. This article was speaking to a newly released status of women and girls in Canada report called “Reality Check” (FIFIA, 2010).² A reality check is indeed required when discourse suggests that girls continue to be up against a masculine culture of schooling which articulates and reinforces *acceptable* notions of “being a girl”, notions that are oppressive in nature. Thus, the need for continued attention to girls is imperative. If teachers do not intervene we become complicit in maintaining the same social norms that have served to oppress girls. A focus on girls, through education, could manifest within effective mentorship groups and other forms of critical programming. To begin to understand the need to focus on girls and subsequently how to address their issues, we must first consider how they are socialized and the implications of such socializations in the context of public education.

While it is no secret that gender roles and values are communicated to children right from birth, how this communication negatively affects a girl’s existence is increasingly being critiqued. Girls often receive pink while boys often receive blue, boys tend to get trucks while girls tend to get dolls, and while this may seem harmless, girls learn through adult reactions to play nicely while boys indirectly learn (from a lack of adult reaction) that playing roughly is okay. Furthermore, girls are socialized to be silent while boys are socialized to be loud and girls are socialized to be submissive while boys are socialized to dominate. In fact, a study of children in the primary grades indicates that “females scored higher than males . . . in their ability to control impulse behaviour . . . [and] paying attention, but males

¹ Young Women on the Move is a girl’s mentorship initiative launched by the Toronto District School board in January 2010 which aims to develop a socially conscious network of young females.

² FAFIA - Canadian Feminist Alliance for International Action



received higher scores in their curiosity level” (Kerr, 2010, p. 12). Therefore, girls have traditionally been socialized to perform their role as females in certain and particular ways. The social construction of “good girls”, although it may look different today, includes being docile, looking pretty and being liked by the boys. Within the schooling context, girls have learnt early that you do not challenge the teacher, you do what you are told, you can be smart – but not too smart, and at all times be nice. From a social perspective this framework for girls is at play when we consider: how females are sexually objectified within school walls by the boys, how girls often choose to engage in bullying amongst other girls and how girls perform in front of their teachers. Hence, specific expressions of gender are manifested in society and in public education. Perhaps it is this construction of females, rather than girls are ‘doing just fine’, which explains why girls are suspended less and underrepresented in behavioral programs. And perhaps it is this same social construction that can be called into question when we consider the academic, economic and social data that demonstrate a girl’s struggle within a male-centric world. Thus, in the following sections I will explore the economic and social conditions of girls.

Are Girls ‘Doing Just Fine’ Academically and Economically?

As mentioned earlier, there is a prevalent notion that girls have closed the achievement gap, surpassed the boys and therefore fair well economically. In some academic areas girls do outperform the boys, however there is contradictory data that must be considered. For example, Kerr (2010) indicates that according to EQAO mathematics scores boys are consistently outperforming girls in both level 3 and 4; in addition, while females enroll in university prep courses at a higher rate than males, this is not true for geometry and algebra. Statistics Canada (2002-2003) suggests that females are entering university at a marginally higher rate, however in graduate programs it is the males that are entering at a higher rate. Furthermore, research suggests that males still earn more than females and that this economic gap is hypothesized to continue (Drolet, 2007; Kerr 2010). Subsequently, women in Canada have a higher overall poverty rate than males (FAFIA, 2010). Finally, consider that girls are still underrepresented in cutting edge fields such as engineering, natural science and computer science (AAUW, 2001; FAFIA, 2010).³ Lipkin (2009) suggests “Girls’ diligence in school may pay off in better grades, but does it come at the cost of reinforcing a stereotypical femininity that works against them once they are out of the school system” (p. 33). Therefore, while it may appear that girls as a homogenous group are doing fine academically, they are at risk for living in poverty and continue to be underrepresented in areas that have historically been male dominated.

Complicating the already complex world of academics and economics between the genders are the implications of race and class. Within a Canadian context “particular groups of women, including single mothers, Aboriginal women, women of colour, immigrant women, women with disabilities, and single women, have shockingly high rates of poverty” (FAFIA, 2010). Therefore, while women as a whole are at risk for poverty, FAFIA points out that certain women possess a higher probability of being impoverished. When we consider how issues of poverty affect a child’s schooling experience we know that children who come from low income families continue to underperform in school when compared to middle-class children (TDSB, 2008). Along racial lines in the TDSB, “East Asian students have the highest proportion achieving at or above the provincial standard, followed by White, Southeast Asian, South Asian, Mixed, Middle Eastern, Latin, and Black Students in Reading and Writing”(TDSB, 2008). Although the breadth and depth of race and class implications are not addressed in this article – it is worthwhile to contemplate if the same gendered socializations which hold females (as a homogenous group) captive, also hold low-income and racialized girls captive in more complex ways.

³ AAUW - American Association of University Women

Are Girls ‘Doing Just Fine’ Socially?

A common interpretation of females is that they are social beings who negotiate school settings quite well. This might be the reason for AAUW reports indicating that girls are not receiving as much attention from classroom teachers when compared to boys. Perhaps it is this same interpretation of females, intertwined with notions of what a girl “should” be like, which accounts for research indicating that girls are less confident than males (Lipkin, 2009). Girls suffer from various forms of sexual harassment by males within the school walls and often do not possess the confidence, understanding and voice to challenge, report or say no to male advances. Many of these girls believe that their own objectification and personal violation is “okay” and therefore they have little choice but to submit (CBC, 2009). What is education doing about this? Despite research which indicates that both sexual assault and harassment are occurring at high rates in Toronto schools, approaches to school safety are often gender-neutral (privileging the types of violence perpetrated between males) and most anti-bullying programs do not address the root causes of violence perpetrated against females (Falconer, 2008). When we add all of this to the fact that statistics signify girls are more likely to battle with mental health issues at a much higher rate than boys (Friedman, 1999), the magnitude of girls’ social issues becomes more clear.

Again, including the complicated layer of race and class to this discussion we find, similar to the academic and economic trends, marginalized populations are at greater risk socially. For example, data suggests that minoritized females have less interaction with teachers than do their white counterparts even though they attempt to initiate conversation more frequently (AAUW, 1992). With this reduced access to teachers they begin to disengage from the process of education. With respect to gender-based violence, Collins (2004) points to the fact that minoritized and impoverished females are more sexualized both historically and through the lens of the media. Therefore, it is no surprise that girls from racialized and low socioeconomic communities are more vulnerable to gender-based violence (Falconer, 2008). Thus, girls need both support and guidance in the social arenas as they attempt to navigate public education and negotiate their own healthy concept of self.

The Forgotten Group: Thinking About Girls and Mentorship

Within the smaller context of schooling to the broader context of society there is a need to focus on girls and their issues. This is necessary or we risk girls becoming a “forgotten group”, particularly in a society where there is a common perception of gender-neutrality and the absence of gender inequities. In a Canadian context (FIFIA, 2010), this is a trend that has already emerged “women’s achievements in all twelve areas of critical concern [one of which is education] . . . have been slowed or turned back”(p. 2). During 2004-2009, Canada has eliminated the terminology “gender equity” from the mandate of the Status of Women⁴ and has closed twelve of sixteen Status of Women offices. To me, these are urgent concerns that must be addressed. Thus, the goal of raising awareness regarding the academic, economic and social realities of girls and women in Canada is to think about where we go from here in public education and to consider solutions. My belief is that one possible way to support girls is to present ways in which we might grapple with what it means to be a girl through school-based mentorship.⁵ I feel that some of the most meaningful mentorship transpires when girls begin to understand how the social structure affects their lives in oppressive ways. These are structures that support and reproduce notions of being male and female. Brown (2003) suggests:

⁴ The Status of Women is the primary institution responsible for gender equality in Canada (Reality Check, 2010)

⁵ School-Based Mentorship can be defined as a relationship between a young person and an adult offering the young person an opportunity to make sense of their world in a school environment.

Children take in not only the categories of male and female but also the feelings associated with them - the approval and support that comes when they voice or comply with good girl behavior, as well as the anxiety and fear they experience when they cross gender lines they didn't even know were there. They have to make sense out of the fact that most adults are invested in these gender categories to a greater or lesser degree and that signs of girls' self-assurance, assertiveness, and competitive nature are often labeled unfeminine and seem to bother people. Sometimes directly and sometimes subtly – by a reprimand, or a disapproving or surprised look – they are told to tone down their wild sides, to modulate their voices, to focus on “girl things” or maybe “boy things” in a girl way. Relationally, they are told to work things out at all costs, not to be angry, not to speak bad thoughts or strong feelings... girls learn gradually to override their strong feelings and thoughts when adults admonish them for wandering too far outside the lines of proper girl behavior” (Brown, 2003, pg. 38).

The implications of gender socialization are both deep and wide, placing girls in a precarious position. Understanding Brown's assertion about what it means to be a girl verses a boy is a necessary starting point whenever we choose to mentor females, start with their reality. Hence it is this framework, the need to be conscious of a girl's social condition, which lays the foundation for thinking about the goals of mentorship programs.

The Goal of Mentorship Programs

Consider a concept that I am borrowing from Dr. Joyce King when she spoke at the 2009 SCEE⁶ conference. She asked us to consider elevating young people and closing the achievement gap by teachers thinking about heritage knowledge as well as academic and cultural excellence as a part of their practice⁷. She made clear that when individuals understand the social structure, overcome barriers and surpass where they were, their objective is to be agents of change rather than helping to maintain the current power structure. To me, this means that children must be directly taught about social structures, who such structures privilege and the consequences of these structures for individual groups. The implication, according to Dr. Joyce King, is that educational success is “being able to hold your own in the classroom [and beyond] and not forget your own in the community”⁸. Thus, when thinking about mentorship programs, the girls and mentors must together explore how females are located in a seemingly malecentric world in order for them to transform their society and support other girls to do the same.

The above discussion concerning cultural excellence begs an ideological question, one that every mentor, educator and person who is invested in the lives of young people must grapple with. What is the purpose of education and are mentorship programs leading us to this end? If we cannot answer the first question then the second becomes benign. Of course, this is a complicated question and if we were to sit in ten different staff rooms and ask ‘what is the purpose of education?’ we would receive at least ten different answers. However, most educators can probably agree that we want to see students succeed. This leads to another question, what is student success? To me, the fundamental purpose of

⁶ School and Community Engaged Education (SCEE) is a partnership between York University and TDSB in response to the publication of the Board Report, *Improving Success for Black Students*, issued on January 30, 2008.

⁷ “cultural knowledge”—the culture of the society in which people reside; “heritage knowledge” – the culture informed by ethno-racial/national origin to help students attain “academic excellence and cultural excellence,” (Taken from <http://edu.apps01.yorku.ca/news/scee-summer-institute-focuses-on-inclusive-education-and-student-achievement>

⁸ SCEE conference, August 2009

education is to create socially and politically conscious young people, who can understand and articulate their relationship to the world around them and each other. Young people who can use this knowledge to actively participate in the transformation of their community to work against oppression and for a socially just world. Is this a tall order? Perhaps. However, anything less, would feed into and support an education system/society that is run by a dominant culture where the oppressed will always exist. Similar to the cycle of violence, this cycle of education, which creates marginalized groups, must be broken.

Thus, the purpose of mentorship as I see it is not necessarily to “even the playing field” meaning that boys would achieve the same academic levels as girls; that the same number of boys would populate academic mathematics streams as girls; that the same number of males and females would apply to university; or that girls and boys would get paid the exact same amount of money for the exact same job. The goal, as stated above, is to support girls in the transformation of their school/society, allowing for a natural balancing of the playing field. Thus, the view of mentorship that I am presenting is an attempt by mentors to intervene in the lives of mentees leading to this goal. It is an avenue for mentors to understand the social, cultural and economic conditions of the mentee and then to offer possibilities for navigating this world. In order for educators to achieve this goal, as already posited, we must consider the social construction of females and subsequently males. Another necessary consideration is the recognition that girls are not a homogenous group and that the difference amongst girls is as wide as the differences between boys and girls. This means that the content and approach of mentorship programs, in addition to female socialization, must also incorporate the implications of race and class.

Giving Attention to the Difference and Diversity Among Girls

An inherent characteristic among some mentorship groups in the Greater Toronto Area is ethnic and economic diversity. While the literature is clear regarding the key issues that young women seem to grapple with, what is often omitted from the conversation is that “girls” are not a homogeneous group. Thus, differences along racial and class lines create differences in how these issues manifest among various girls. For example, the longstanding “girl issue” of self-esteem is often the topic of focus in many girl’s groups. This is a commonly agreed upon hot topic as numerous sources confirm that the downward spiral of self-esteem peaks in early adolescence for girls (Friedman, 1999; Lipkin, 2009; Simmons, 2002). However, females who are marked by oppression, due to race or class, have much higher levels of self-esteem when juxtaposed to white middle-class females. Research indicates that in their racialized and/or impoverished social position, being loud and confident is a necessary survival skill within their communities (Gaymes San Vicente, 2006; Simmon, 2002; Weis&Fine, 2005). While self-esteem is still an issue that should be addressed with all females, it perhaps is not a key issue for marginalized females. Instead, a focus for teachers may be on why self-esteem is a necessary survival skill and how they can negotiate this skill in a school setting where females being “loud”, “too assertive” and “unruly” is punishable. These girls are punished by suspensions, being made to feel marginalized in the classroom and social alienation because it is deemed unfeminine. Thus, when we choose to examine any girls’ issues in programs we must be cognizant of our audience and ways to approach the issues from diverse perspectives. It is important for us to note that “running a mentorship program is not easy, there are many programmatic details that can have a big impact on outcomes for youth. Recent mentoring research even indicates that a short-lived, less than positive mentoring relationship (a hallmark of programs that are not well designed) can actually have a negative impact on participating youth” (Garringer & Jucovy, 2007, p. iii). Therefore, if we do not approach issues in meaningful and diverse ways we may further alienate certain groups of girls.

A Final Word

With the consistent messaging amongst educators and in the media that “education is failing our boys”, the natural inference is that education is not equally failing the girls. The implication is that much time and energy is put into a strategy to support the boys without the same energy being placed on the girls. While educators must continue to devise a strategy to address the needs of the boys, we must simultaneously devise a strategy for the girls. Continuing with the notion that girl’s are ‘ doing just fine’ will alienate their needs in a public education system. Recognizing girls’ needs does not negate the need to support the boys; it simply reminds us that we would be remiss as educators to allow the issues of young women to be dismissed. If we consider that the purpose of education is to create socially and politically conscious young people who can use this knowledge to actively participate in the transformation of their world; then alongside our efforts to support boys in overcoming educational and societal barriers, we must support the girls. Paulo Friere posits “Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world.” (2003) It is up to us, as educators, to determine where we stand and if we have embedded ‘the practice of freedom’ into our programming. We must continually question our greater educational purpose and if girls’ mentorship and other critical programs are leading to this end. How we choose to contextually frame mentorship can be the difference between social change and maintaining the status quo. If we frame mentorship as a ‘practice of freedom’, where a girl’s social construction is challenged, we equip young women to become agents of change. Hence, we come back to the purpose of education – transformation leading to a socially just world.

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