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ABSTRACT

The Girls' Resiliency Program is a youth empowerment program for girls in a rural, economically depressed area of West Virginia. Girls develop leadership skills by participating in board meetings, discussion groups, recreational events, song writing and poetry workshops, action research, and school and community service projects. Evaluation research conducted during summer and fall 2000 focused on girls' experiences with the action research summer projects and personal relations girls experienced in the program. Two staff members were participant observers in the application process, training sessions, working meetings of the girls' action research teams, and a meeting of the applied communications class, and they interviewed the nine girls who participated in the summer research project. Findings indicate that the girls learned the importance of persistence, hard work, and responsibility and the joy of work that is personally rewarding. They also learned a lot about the problems they studied and how that knowledge could be helpful to them individually and to the broader community. The adults learned that a major factor in program success was the close, respectful personal relationships among the participating girls and women. Forming such relationships between women and girls was not always easy. It required a delicate balance between coaching that pushes too hard, and coaching that coddles too much, demanding too little of individuals who learn to perform to lower expectations. (TD)

TEEN GIRLS TAKE ON COMMUNITY PROBLEMS: LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE FIELD

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Abstract

The Girls' Resiliency Program operates in a rural, economically depressed area in West Virginia, providing teen girls opportunities to develop leadership skills by participating in a variety of activities. This paper features lessons learned from our study of one of the program's more unique components – the summer research internships. Based on two years of ethnographic study, we describe the internship program and discuss what we learned about research, about jobs, about community problems studied by interns, and about ourselves.

Introduction

The Girls' Resiliency Program, sponsored by the Appalachian Women's Leadership Project, operates in a rural, economically depressed area in West Virginia. Like other youth empowerment programs, the Resiliency Program provides teenage girls opportunities to select and plan activities and programs that are designed to help them (Penuel & Freeman, 1997). Girls develop leadership skills by participating in activities such as Resiliency Program board meetings, discussion groups, recreational events, song writing and poetry workshops, action research, and school and community service projects. The Girls' Resiliency Program Board of Directors, consisting of twelve voting members – six girls and six community members, is the governing body for the program, overseeing all facets of program operations including budget, personnel, programming, and evaluation. Supported largely by a Ms. Foundation for Women grant, the program began in 1997 with fewer than 20 girls in two junior-senior high schools. Currently in its fifth year of operation, the Resiliency Program is serving over 60 girls in three Lincoln County junior-senior high schools this fall.

The Girls' Resiliency Program was founded by Lincoln County resident Shelley Gaines who wrote the original grant proposal and has served as director of the program since its inception. Program growth over the past four years necessitated expansions of program staff. In 1999, Jessica Lehman was employed as assistant program director; a year later Elizabeth Runyon was employed as a program specialist; and this year three

Resiliency Program girls who had finished or left high school were hired as program assistants.

Girls in the Resiliency Program participate in a range of activities. Those selected to serve on the board of directors attend monthly meetings to handle program business. All participants attend discussion meetings in their schools every other week. Staff and girls alternately lead discussions. Participants also attend after-school recreational activities once a month, participate in two or three arts activities each month, contribute time and energy to local community service projects approximately once each six weeks, and some girls are employed by the program during the summer. Those employed in the summer conduct action research by identifying and studying problems of concern to adolescent girls in Lincoln County.

Following a brief explanation of our research methods, this paper focuses on the girls' experiences with the summer research internship program and how it provides important opportunities for girls to learn about research, jobs, community issues, and themselves. It also provides opportunities for adults, both program staff and university-based researchers, to learn about research, community issues, professional and personal relationships, and themselves.

Qualitative Research Methods: Research Within Research

Last year's 1999-2000 qualitative evaluation research was our initial effort to use participant-observation and interviewing to understand and describe the Girls' Resiliency Program in terms of what it means to the girls themselves and the Lincoln County community generally. Based on over 500 pages of narrative data, the report attributed the program's success to at least two factors.

> First, the program provides regular opportunities for girls to engage in new, positive, challenging experiences. These experiences, whether in recreation, the arts, community service, action research, or otherwise, are personally empowering vehicles for self-exploration, communication, learning, and leadership development. Secondly, the program provides girls a strong sense of personal connection with other girls in the program and with adult staff members. These personal relationships, built on a strong foundation of care, trust, and respect, are facilitated and nurtured through formal activities such as weekly discussion groups as well as informal conversations and interactions. (1999-2000 Qualitative Evaluation Report)

The 2000-2001 evaluation research followed the methodology and built on the findings of the first qualitative study of the Girls' Resiliency Program. As in the first study, part-time ethnographers (this year, Courtney Grimes and Jennifer Farrar) under the supervision of Linda Spatig at Marshall University, spent many hours during the summer and fall of 2000 generating approximately 400 pages of narrative data about the program. For this second study, however, instead of attempting to describe all aspects of the program the ethnographers focused on two issues that emerged in the first study: (1)

girls' experiences with the action research summer projects, and (2) personal relationships girls experience in the program.

Following Schubert's (1996) recommendation to involve participants in decision-making during each stage of participatory research, Linda consulted with program staff in selecting one of the program's more unique activities – the summer research internships – to examine in greater depth. Courtney and Jennifer were participant observers in the Resiliency Program board meeting where girls applied for the summer research positions; they participated and observed in five three-hour research training sessions at Marshall University, two working meetings of the girls' action research teams, and one meeting of the Applied Communications class; and they interviewed, either individually or in a small focus group, nine girls who participated in the summer research project.

After each observation, ethnographers wrote detailed fieldnotes in which they described and reflected on what they had seen and heard. Linda Spatig reviewed data as they were generated. Shelley Gaines and Jessica Lehman also reviewed fieldnotes from activities in which Resiliency Program staff had been present. The research interns did not review fieldnotes. Barbara Lanham transcribed taped interviews with participants verbatim; Courtney and Jennifer reviewed transcripts for accuracy; Linda reviewed the revised transcripts. In April and May, 2001, Courtney and Linda used QSR Nud.IST, a software package for handling narrative data, to facilitate the coding and content analysis of fieldnotes and interview transcripts. Shelley was consulted at several points during the analysis and writing process. First she gave her approval for initial coding categories Linda and Courtney suggested. Later, she and Jessica reviewed the first complete draft of the report filling in missing details, correcting factual inaccuracies, and suggesting alternative interpretations on a few occasions.

Research Internships

For the past two years the Girls' Resiliency Program has offered girls employment as research interns during the summer months. In the first year of the internships (Summer, 1999) five interns conducted both Resiliency Program evaluation research and action research on identified community problems. This year (Summer, 2000) eleven girls were hired as research interns to conduct action research and program evaluation. Of the original eleven girls hired, nine completed the internships. One resigned because of family problems and one was fired as a result of failure to meet job expectations, even after given feedback. The 2000 internship included training in research methods, a class in applied communications, and guidance in working with a small group of girls to plan and carry out an action research project in Lincoln County.

Getting the Job

The first step of the process was applying for the job. Resiliency Program girls interested in the research internship were required to complete an application form and be interviewed by the Girls' Resiliency Board of Directors. Shelley Gaines began each interview by introducing everyone, explaining the interview process, and trying to make the interviewee feel comfortable. Each board member asked at least one interview

question and each interviewee was offered an opportunity to ask questions of the board. As the following fieldnote excerpt illustrates, the interview process provided girls, many of whom were nervous about being interviewed, a chance to prepare for and experience a formal job interview in a relatively informal, supportive context.

> Amber[i] [intern applicant] was very dressed up, wearing a tan skirt suit with white high heel shoes. Shelley began by introducing board members and explaining the interview process . . .. Amber was very friendly. She smiled at the board members and made good eye contact. When asked why she thought she was good for the position, she replied that she was honest, trustworthy, and reliable. She listed possible research topics as drug abuse and environmental pollution . . .. At the end of the interview Shelley thanked her for coming and told Amber she would notify her about the position . . . It appeared [Amber] had a good understanding of what the position required and what was going to be expected of her . . .. She [seemed to take] the interview and the summer job seriously . . .. She looked nervous at the beginning of the interview but she soon settled in and looked comfortable.

It was a gratifying experience for girls who had not previously had opportunities for paid employment outside their own families to receive notification of their selection as a research intern. Tabitha, for example, described it as an exciting event that enhanced her self-esteem.

> This is actually my first real job . . . and it made me feel so good about myself knowing that someone is willing to give me a chance . . .. It just made me feel good that I have a job – a real job to put down on a piece of paper for a reference now . . . I was really excited. I told everyone . . .. I went around to people and [said], "I just got my first real job!" . . . Especially the money part made me feel good that I'm going to be able to buy my own [things]. (Individual interview)

Job Training

Prior to conducting their own research projects, interns completed a series of research training workshops at Marshall University. Linda Spatig facilitated the first three workshops. The first workshop introduced general concepts of research, inquiry, and social versus physical sciences; the second focused on research ethics and the distinction between applied and basic research; and the third session focused on the scientific method and quantitative versus qualitative research methods. Courtney Grimes and Jennifer Farrar facilitated the last two workshop sessions, one focusing on participant-observation and the other on ethnographic interviewing.

The workshops featured pleasant, non-intimidating activities designed to encourage personally meaningful understandings, rather than official academic definitions, of research. For example, in the first workshop girls participated in a free association exercise and a "draw a scientist" activity in which they expressed their feelings and prior knowledge about science and research. These activities, which engaged the girls in intellectual dialog in a relatively low-stress context, challenged misconceptions about science and research.

> Once these descriptions of a mad scientist were introduced they began to discuss stereotypes and how we can fall into the pattern of believing stereotypes. [Linda] asked, "What are some stereotypes of women?" The girls said, "Staying in the kitchen," "Taking care of the house and the kids." Then they were asked to think of stereotypes of people in their geographic area. They said, "Hicks," "Barefoot," "Bad teeth," and "That they're stupid." They discussed how stereotypes can be hurtful and wrong. Linda pointed out that lots of different people do research and are scientists – women, men, people of all different ethnicities. (Fieldnotes)

Training workshops engaged the girls actively in all aspects of the research process – including selecting a topic of study and generating research questions and/or hypotheses, collecting and analyzing data, and drawing conclusions. In the session on participant-observation, for example, girls took turns acting out scenes while the others watched and wrote fieldnotes. Each dramatization was followed by a discussion about what the girls observed, how they interpreted it, and what they wrote in their fieldnotes.

Along the same lines, the training session on ethnographic interviewing included a lively game featuring different kinds of interview questions.

> The girls were sitting in two parallel rows [facing each other], perpendicular to the front [chalk] board . . . A question was chosen and the person at the front said, "Our question is an open question for Number One!" The girls whose numbers corresponded to the number called would have to run up and put down their card [with an open question], then run back to their seats, trying to beat the other person . . .. One example of an open question was offered by Emily, who said, "Tell me something about your boyfriend." (Fieldnotes)

Beginning during the same two-week period the research training workshops were occurring at Marshall University, and continuing for a total of eight weeks, the girls were enrolled in an Applied Communications class at the Lincoln County Vocational School. Prior arrangements with Lincoln County school officials permitted interns to receive course credit for this class taught by a certified public school teacher. Resiliency Program staff hoped the class would enhance the girls' listening, speaking, and writing skills, benefiting their summer research as well as future achievement in school and elsewhere. During our one observation of the class, girls were actively engaged in a lively group discussion about how to prepare speeches in a way that keeps the audience interested.

> As Ms. N [teacher] was going over [the information] she used personal examples to explain things . . . It was very personalized and she seems so nice to the girls. She allows them to talk and share their ideas. At times it seemed as if the girls were interrupting, but . . .it was just because they were so excited to discuss and share ideas. (Fieldnotes)

However, in individual and focus group interviews, only one girl spoke favorably about the class, commenting on its value in strengthening the girls' college applications: "It actually [makes] your record good [for] . . . college . . . so it makes it a lot worth doing." Whereas the course was newly created by Girls' Resiliency Program staff and the Board

of Education, at least one intern thought she had already completed the course for credit at school and thus would not benefit from the opportunity of additional course credit. Others complained that the class was too much like school: "We get worksheet after worksheet and we're there from 8:30 – 12:30 . . . We get homework every night."

The Applied Communication class continued throughout much of the summer. One intern believed the class detracted from the summer research effort because it took a great deal of time that could have been devoted to conducting the research projects.

> If we didn't have class we'd have more time to get our work done . . . .We have to have class every Tuesday and Thursday and that's two days plus . . . you have to put in thirty hours a week. How can you do that if you have two days of class? . . . If we didn't have class we'd have more time to get done. (Individual interview)

Conducting the Research

The interns worked together in three small groups, each with its own research focus. Emily, Mary, and Margaret studied foster care; Laura, Natasha, and Suzanne studied racial prejudice; and Amber, Brittany, and Tabitha studied domestic violence. The members of each group engaged in an "exercise in democratic participation" (Malekoff, 1994) as they selected their research focus.

> We brainstormed for about two hours and then we voted on which one we felt was more important and we narrowed it down to I think six and then we voted again on the main topics we wanted and we got down to two. Then we got down to the one we felt was most important. (Individual interview)

In action research, perceived problems are identified for study in the hope of bringing about change as a result. Interns identified problems they perceived as important in the local community; in some cases, they also had personal interest in the issues. For example, Mary, Emily, and Margaret were concerned about Lincoln County children who had been mistreated in their foster families. "It is serious enough to where [we] want to learn about it because I mean it can be really horrible sometimes for some children. Some children might get a bad foster parent - - they just do it for the money; they don't care about the child." (Individual Interview)

Once each group identified a research topic and formulated a question, they developed a plan for collecting data. As the following fieldnote excerpt illustrates, the interns were expected to use research expertise gained in their university training workshops to design their studies.

> Shelley began by asking them what their [question] was. The girls said, "How do people in Lincoln County feel about foster care?" Shelley asked the group as a whole, "What kind of research is this?" The unanimous response was, "Qualitative research." Shelley said, "Why is this qualitative?" A few people answered at once, "Because it's feelings; . . . it's asking how do people feel." Shelley said, "Okay, and what [data collection] method will you guys be using?" Margaret said, "Interviews." Shelley asked them, "Who are you going to

interview?" Someone said, "People." Shelley said, "You've got to be more specific." This led to a discussion about who they were going to interview . . .. I believe it was Margaret who finally said, "One professional, one child, and one foster parent." Shelley said, "Okay, now how are we going to get these people?"

After a lengthy discussion of the possibilities, the girls decided to use personal contacts to locate individuals to interview. Even so, locating interviewees was not easy. Margaret explained, "There's not very many foster parents that's willing to talk."

The group studying racial prejudice among children in Lincoln County also had difficulty gaining access to research participants. Laura, Natasha, and Suzanne sent permission slips home with over 50 children at one Lincoln County summer program and only received five consent forms back. One of the five was absent from the program the day the girls went to interview, so they conducted a focus group interview with the other four. At another Lincoln County facility for children, only one permission slip was returned and the staff were unwilling to pull one child out for an interview. The girls were perplexed and a bit suspicious about the reluctance of people to allow their children to participate in the research. "You want to get in there and find out why there's so much prejudice. If they're not prejudiced, why don't they want their children explaining? . . . Are they afraid of what their children's going to say?" (Individual interview)

The three groups of interns relied primarily on individual and focus group interviews to collect data. Each group of research interns developed semi-structured interview schedules. Margaret described the questions her group prepared for the Department of Health and Human Resources (DHHR) staff interview about foster care:

> We asked how many years you've been working with this; how you think the other people in Lincoln County view the organization. How do you view the organization? . . . We also asked, "Do you feel like the children are being treated with respect? What do you think are the most common problems . . . between foster parents and children?" (Individual interview)

Despite the university research training and considerable Resiliency Program staff assistance with designing and preparing for the action research, interns had problems executing their research projects. For one thing, difficulties gaining access, discussed above, limited the quantity and quality of data the interns were able to collect. When Laura described what she had learned from her study of racial prejudice, she replied:

> I learned . . . that the kids –some of them - do know what prejudice means, but some of them don't . . . I did an interview of the second grade kids and we really don't have that much to go on because we only did four kids and the four kids we had didn't really care about it . . .. [Race] didn't really mean anything to them. They were just friends to everybody. (Individual interview)

Similarly, the group studying foster care experienced delays in obtaining data as a result of difficulties locating participants. The members of the group planned to interview a DHHR staff member, one foster parent, and one foster child each, but had difficulty scheduling appointments with interviewees: "We've interviewed the DHHR [staff

member] . . . and Emily still has to [interview] a professional who is on vacation for two or three weeks and we can't find them." (Individual interview)

Another factor that constrained the data collection and analysis processes was that some girls had other summer obligations, making it difficult for the intern groups to schedule mutually agreeable times to work together on the research. "It's been complicated because we have other things to do this summer than just a job . . . Some of us [have] band practice . . . and we had people going to camp [so] it's just not easy" (Individual interview). In addition, completing data collection and analysis may have been difficult as a result of conflicting demands on Resiliency Program director Shelley Gaines who was caring for a newborn baby, serving as one of two primary staff members for the research internship, and continuing to direct the entire program.

Yet another factor in the interns' difficulty completing data collection and analysis by the end of the summer employment period was a degree of mismatch between the university research training and the girls' actual research jobs. Whereas the training sessions gave interns a good introduction to social science research, both quantitative and qualitative, they lacked in terms of specific research how-tos, especially in terms of analysis of data and dissemination of findings. A sixth training session on data coding and analysis, provided by Linda Spatig in the fall, may have been too little too late.

Despite these difficulties with completing research projects, the 2000-2001 interns managed to accomplish more than the first year interns. According to an intern who was involved with the research program both summers,

> I like it [this year] because we're finally getting something done . . . This year Shelley's letting us actually finish it . . . we're getting something done. Because last year we passed out the surveys and we didn't even get them all entered into the computer and this year we've already got our first focus group done . . . I can actually get something done this year.

One way the Girls' Resiliency staff encouraged fuller completion of projects this year was to make the interns' final paychecks contingent upon satisfactory completion of the research project. The intern above appreciated this incentive to accomplish more research this year and another intern appreciated the fairness of these payment arrangements.

> It's fair really because you are supposed to get everything done and then once you don't there's something you have to do about it. It doesn't really bother me . . . I think it will be all right this way. . . All you have to do is think about well if I get this done then I get my money. If I don't, I won't ever get the money. So you think about getting it done, then you'll get your money. (Individual interview)

On the other hand, at least one intern objected to the final paychecks being held, as the following interview excerpt illustrates:

> They're giving us only half of our paycheck on the 15th instead of the full paycheck because [we] haven't got everything done. I really don't think they should do that because we've worked hard even though we haven't got everything completed . . .. We are supposed to get like $350.00 and they're only giving us

$175.00 this time and when we get everything accomplished . . . and all the data collected and everything else, they'll give us the other $175.00 . . . I think they should give us the money like they said they were going to even though we don't have our stuff done. Because the reason why my group is behind is because two of my group members went to Teen Institute . . . and Shelley had company one week so we couldn't get it done . . . It's not 100% our fault that we didn't get everything done.

Lessons Learned

By Interns

The summer research internship program was an enlightening experience for girls who participated in it. The interns learned about research, about jobs, about the topics they studied, and about themselves. For Tabitha, for example, the internship was a lesson in the importance of persistence and hard work.

> It's hard. I came in thinking, "It's not going to be that hard," but it is actually super hard. We've got to work every day really. . . . My mistake was I figured all the days that they didn't have nothing planned you could just goof off, but you really can't. You've got to keep on the ball. You've got to make plans ahead of time. You've got to really work instead of goof off . . . It's really hard work, but it pays off – having the money – not only the money but it's a learning experience.

Along the same lines, Margaret learned the importance of responsibility and the joy of work that is personally rewarding.

> I'm not a person who's going to hunker down a lot but I found a different me in this program. I've changed a lot. I feel I grew up. I [took] responsibility and learned that work is not just a grinding stone. It's fun, too. Because if you find something that you really like it's going to be fun . . . I've learned that communication is a big part of working and I've learned that trust is another huge part. And I've learned that you can make friends no matter what you do.

The action research process gave interns a vehicle for identifying, questioning, and trying to alleviate immediate, local problems (Arhar, Holley, & Kasten, 2001). Interns learned a great deal about the problems they studied and how that knowledge could be helpful to them individually as well as to the broader community.

> I actually learned where you can go [if you're abused]. [If] I get in a relationship with someone that is abusing me I know where I can turn. I can educate other people outside the group. I mean, I can educate . . . women out in Lincoln County . . . that there are places, people willing to help. So it makes me feel good inside that I'm actually being able to help others.

By Adults

Participating in and studying the internship program has been an enlightening

experience for adults as well. Program staff members and university-based researchers learned that a major factor in the success of the summer internship, and other Resiliency Program activities, is the close, respectful personal relationships among the participating girls and women. Like Woods, Boyle, Jeffrey, and Troman (2000), we found that the quality of educational experiences depends upon the development of genuine human relationships. Jessica Lehman, for example, talked about the importance of learning about relationships and "learning to trust somebody, learning to be open, learning to be loved, and to care about another person."

We also learned that close relationships with adults do not always come easy for the girls. Margaret, who described Shelley as a second mother, talked about the difficulty of forming that relationship.

> When I first joined [the Resiliency Program] it was hard for me to trust Shelley . . . Over the years she's showed me that she shows respect for everybody. She treats no one different. I mean, she has her bad days and her good days. And she shows us respect even . . . when she's upset about something.

Close relationships with girls can be difficult for the women as well. Shelley talked about the importance of "letting [herself] feel," even in relationships where such closeness can result in feelings that are painful. "Getting really close and understanding other people [can be] painful to do . . . when you're connecting with people who don't have happy-go-lucky lives."

We came to see Shelley and Jessica's method of facilitating healthy personal relationships with and among the girls as a form of personal coaching that is simultaneously challenging and nurturing. Their coaching features compassionate, respectful listening to young peoples' previously established understandings and values *and* the willingness to "talk back" – to speak and act sometimes in ways that challenge young peoples' ideas and behaviors (Ayers, 1997). Shelley and Jessica challenge the girls to think and behave in new ways; at the same time, they accept, nurture, and support the girls, allowing them to make their own decisions and learn from their own mistakes. As one intern explained, "[Shelley and Jessica] are there for you . . . They don't tell you to go out and do this. They lead you to your own answers . . . They tell us there's not [one] wrong way or right way." In other words, they provide guidance for girls as they struggle to envision and then implement their own solutions to problems.

We found, however, that it is hard to get just the right mix of challenge and support. It is difficult to maintain the delicate balance between coaching that pushes too hard, demanding more than individuals feel able to give and coaching that coddles too much, demanding too little of individuals who learn to live down to expectations. Our hope is to respect girls' autonomy and their responsibility for themselves, thereby enabling them to build strong relationships of their own – with adults, with peers, with themselves, and with their community.

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[i] The names of summer interns have been changed to protect their privacy.

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