

Inspire

New Leader: Practical strategies for student achievement



Promoting Young Women's Voices in Schools and Communities

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"The idea for boys is manhood and leadership. If you're a boy you get power with getting older. With the female you get opprobrium. There is nothing to do with leadership."

- Judy Mann, *The Difference: Discovering the Hidden Ways We Silence Girls: Finding Alternatives That Can Give Them a Voice*

Are you interested in promoting and fostering gender equity and critical thinking within your school community? Establishing a girls' leadership group is an excellent way to achieve these goals.

Such groups give female students an opportunity to meet and connect in a safe environment where their concerns and aspirations can be voiced, discussed and supported. This is particularly important for adolescent girls as studies show that the onset of puberty often coincides with a decline in girls' self-esteem, confidence and assertiveness. For the past five years, several of my colleagues and I have guided a girls' leadership group for students in grades 6-8 at Nelson Mandela Park Public School in downtown Toronto.

The girls I work with not only face challenges in terms of gender inequity, nearly all of them are further marginalized due to their socio-economic status, race and cultural and/or religious backgrounds. Our goal in organizing the group was to build leadership capacity within the school and community.

As well, we wanted to imbue in the girls a strong sense of confidence and the belief that their voices matter. To do this, we decided that the group would focus on social justice and gender-based issues at the school, community and global levels. We also wanted to focus on the collective- this was to be a group of diverse women from the community and school working in a collaborative process. The emphasis was to be on action. This was about giving the girls opportunities to develop their leadership skills whilst exploring the ways in which they could have a positive impact in the world today.

It is imperative that all women working with a girls' group realize the potential youth have to be agents of social change. Initially many of the young women will require guidance,

modeling and opportunities to help them acquire the skills set needed to assume leadership roles. Carefully chosen workshops, field trips, speakers, conferences and collaborative projects can all help the girls in this respect.

The workshops and programs our girls participated in over the last few years are too numerous to mention but a few that the group identified as particularly valuable were: the Women's Health Matters Forum and Expo, ETFO's annual Young Women's Leadership conference at OISE, Nightwood Theatre's "Busting Out!" program, Stratford's Teaching Shakespeare School and Deb Chard's Wen-Do self-defense classes.

In our group we've analyzed the root causes of many issues affecting girls and women today. For instance, the girls identified gender stereotypes and feelings of being objectified (sometimes aggressively) by boys and men as one of the challenges they face in their daily lives.

As a result we watched and discussed Sophie Bissonnette's documentary, *Sexy Inc.* The film explores the hypersexualization of the female image in our society and how this devalues and objectifies women, resulting in further sexism and feelings of lowered self-worth in women and girls.

By critically analyzing the root causes of issues and discussing their impact on all of us, the girls were beginning to "deconstruct" some of the negative stereotypes around them. The girls also collaborated with a community agency, Serve Canada, in the development of a book aimed at young women entitled, *She Speaks*, which deals with violence prevention and healthy relationships.

As the girls developed their leadership skills, their voices became stronger and they assumed more responsibility in the group. Again, their achievements are numerous: singing at Black History Month celebrations, creating murals depicting female role models in collaboration with an aboriginal artist from the Regent Park community, designing and implementing an annual, school-wide assembly and activities to commemorate the National Day of Remembrance and Action on Violence Against Women, taking part in the TDSB's Gulu Walk, raising money and awareness for breast cancer research, organizing Wen-Do workshops for women in the Regent Park community and taking part in ceremonies with the Toronto Women of Colour Collective to commemorate Dec. 6th.

The girls have also created their own list of what constitutes a "leader" and set personal short-term and long-term goals for themselves and the group.

The success of the group is evident in the fact that participation has grown over the course of these few years from about eight girls to over thirty. Currently they are developing a website in order to reach a wider audience with their writing and work.

As one of our girls wrote in an article that appeared in the school newspaper this December: "I joined Girls' Group because I want to become a leader. That's what it's all about."

Why Set Up a Girl's Leadership Group?

- promotes and fosters gender equity and critical thinking
- gives female students an opportunity to meet and connect in a safe environment where

their concerns and aspirations can be voiced, discussed and supported

- helps with feelings of marginalization due to socio-economic status, race and cultural and/or religious background
- creates a collaborative process with an emphasis on action. Gives girls opportunities to develop their leadership skills
- with carefully chosen workshops, field trips, speakers, conferences and collaborative projects, results in higher levels of leadership
- by analyzing the root causes of many issues affecting girls and women today through deconstructing negative stereotypes, this results in self-aware, leadership-oriented girls
- as girls develop their leadership skills, their voices will become stronger and they will assume more responsibility for themselves and in groups

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