

Pedagogical Practice with Girls

Learning a Way Forward

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L'apprentissage est au coeur du militantisme féministe. Dans cet article, l'auteure décrit l'apprentissage de jeunes femmes qui animaient un programme de prévention de la violence auprès de pré-adolescentes. Elle discute des limites de l'intervention avec des objectifs prédéterminés auprès des filles dans un milieu scolaire. L'auteure présente une critique qui a été développée à même la pratique et insiste sur l'importance d'un processus flexible.

Activists have long known that social action offers rich learning opportunities. In his seminal study on *Learning in Social Action*, Griff Foley documents and analyses the ways in which community organizing creates opportunities for people to learn about themselves and their role in the world. This conscientization, as Paulo Freire would call it, does not always happen smoothly. It is often the result of the crises and conflicts activists face in social action (Foley; Gouin). As Foley states:

Although struggles ... are often painful for the individuals involved, and although they can and do lead to cul-de-sacs of destructive conflict, they also generate what is probably the most significant sort of human learning. This is learning that enables people to make sense

of, and act on, their environment, and to come to understand themselves as knowledge-creating, acting beings (64).

From kitchen-table collectives to consciousness-raising groups, learning in struggle has been at the heart of feminist movements. In this article, I look at how a grassroots education initiative, the Girls' Project, became a catalyst for discussing and critiquing grassroots practice with pre-adolescent girls. The difficulties that my colleagues and I faced in facilitating this initiative also provide opportunities to gain insight into our practice. The Girls' Project is a contemporary example of the continued centrality of learning in feminist struggle. From our experience possibilities emerge for working with girls in more egalitarian ways.

I will begin by presenting the project and introducing the facilitators. Because learning was more intense when facilitators faced difficult situations, I review two incidents that occurred during the course of the year, and discuss the learning that took place as a result of each circumstance. From facilitators' experiences and reflections, I outline a critique of the ways in which the Girls' Project challenged and reproduced paternalistic attitudes towards girls, and how it re-

inforced heteronormativity within the school. I will then discuss the connections and disconnections between learning and change in the project. Finally, will I propose some directions for involving girls in open pedagogical practices.

Chronology of the Girls' Project

In 2002, Kathleen¹ and I initiated a Girls' Project for 11- to 13-year-old girls attending an elementary school in an urban, low-income, working-class neighbourhood. Our initial motivation for starting the project was to create a safe space for girls at the school to counter the high levels of violence they were experiencing at home and at school. In order to gain the legitimacy necessary to work in a school, we started the project under the umbrella of a feminist non-governmental organization (NGO), with whom we were involved. This project was not funded and was organized and facilitated by three to six volunteers: Chris, Ginger, Kathleen, Lauren, Christine and I;² Kathleen and I started as volunteers and later received one day of salary per week from the NGO to do this work. Other volunteers were not paid and were recruited through our network of friends.

In the initial six months of the project, we focused on getting to know the girls using arts-based ac-

tivities, understanding their school culture, and fostering trust and teamwork. The projects' most popular activities included: dancing, sewing our own fashions, team building activities, hiking in the woods, body painting, photography, drumming and rhythm, radical cheerleading, and putting on our own art show.

In the second year of the project, our objectives were guided by the aforementioned NGO and included violence prevention, building self-advocacy skills and promoting healthy living. The Girls' Project aimed to change girls' individual attitudes towards violence and encourage them to act to change their life situations so that they would deal with violence in pro-active and empowering ways. The underlying assumption of our work was that girls would be moved to emancipatory action when they had been awakened to their own oppression. This assumption, and our way of working with girls, is shared with popular education (Freire) and feminist consciousness-raising groups that emerged in the 1960s and '70s (Butterwick), both of which connect learning to social action; they are educational approaches that allow for reflection on ourselves, the world, and our relationship with the world. Freire refers to this as "conscientization."

Methodology

During the 2003-2004 school year, facilitators of the Girls' Project were involved in participatory research to explore our own learning. That year, all facilitators were white and able-bodied and all but one was university educated. We were a mix of queer, heterosexual, bisexual, gender-questioning/gender-queer, francophone, anglophone, middle-class and working-class young women between the ages of 21 to 32. Most of the facilitators were motivated by the desire to work with girls and to gain skills in community organizing and facilitating. Ginger states:

Like this is the kind of work that I wanna do. And so I'm ...not just here as a volunteer. I'm also here as, like, a learner. It's a way for me to gain those skills.

Many of us were community activists, facilitating and participating in workshops and trainings on various issues. Our practices beyond the Girls' Project informed and

lighted and analysed as reflections of broader societal dynamics. That is, each moment is seen as embodying "the relations of power which define it" (Eisenstein). It is by politicizing our experience, that this research makes visible the practices and discourses of domination (Bannerji). To this end, I outline two Girls' Project incidents as a starting point for discussion.

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strengthened the project, each of us bringing new reflections, methods, and activities. An intimate connection was created between learning and research among facilitators. As Patti Lather argues, "a reciprocally educative focus [to research] breaks down the distinctions between emancipatory research and pedagogy by producing a collaborative analysis that doesn't impose the researcher's understanding of reality" (92). She considers this dialogical tension between theory and practice to be at the centre of emancipatory social science. This praxis is also at the heart of this study.

The women involved in researching the Girls' Project were the ones that would most closely benefit from better understanding their practice. The research process was useful and relevant to activists, integrating empowerment and political activism (Anzaldúa and Moraga; Mies; Ristock and Pennell). It created a reciprocal exchange of reflections and lessons learned among activists and relied on our voices and experiences as a starting point for inquiry. Concretely, data was gathered over the course of the year and consists of written notes and audio-taped discussions among facilitators. Particularly difficult moments are high-

Incident #1: The Safer Sex Workshop

We had three reasons for facilitating a workshop on healthy sexuality with Girls' Project participants: we wanted to address the reality that some of the Girls' Project participants were sexually active; that teachers had not yet covered "sex education" in their curriculum, and that Chris, one of the facilitators, was taking a class on HIV/AIDS prevention and would receive credit for organizing this workshop. To support us, we sought the help of *The Youth Health Initiative*, a local group with experience in facilitating these types of discussions with youth. Kathleen met with *The Youth Health Initiative* to ensure that the workshop would be facilitated in a fun and participatory way. The workshop was held with the large group; 20 to 25 girls were present and participation was voluntary. The workshop began with basic questions such as: "How do you know if someone likes you?" It ended with a demonstration of how to put on a condom (a wooden penis was used for the demonstration). Condoms were also distributed.

Two mistakes were made: we did not inform the school of our condom distribution (a parent called

and the school administrators were caught off guard), and we did not read the sex-positive messages *The Youth Health Initiative* had included with the condoms ahead of time (another parent called and again the school administrators were caught off guard and shocked by the message pertaining to using vegetables during sexual intercourse—that is, how to safely introduce a cucumber into your vagina). The sex-positive messages distributed with the condoms were meant for a college age, sexually-active audience. They included explicit messages that were inappropriate for girls who were starting to explore their sexuality. Some of the girls spoke to the school counsellor about the workshop because it had made them feel uncomfortable. Facilitators and administrators discussed this incident extensively.

The condom “party pack” fiasco resulted in the school being suddenly interested in the programming we were offering and demanding increased accountability on our part. Administrators requested that all activities be approved, thereby increasing surveillance of the Girls’ Project. This never materialized, largely because administrators were extremely busy. The threat loomed nonetheless and facilitators were fearful of being shut down by the school or the supporting NGO. Having promised to take a closer look at all materials and information we shared with the girls, we also feared we would end up censoring ourselves.

This incident also made us question our attempt to adapt popular education and consciousness-raising methods to girls. We learned about the limitations of this effort and the assumptions we, and others, have about young people.

Ginger: *We weren't thinking about what the girls want or need ... it just felt like we spent a lot of time talking about what we want to get out of it. Or what we want for the girls. And assuming*

that we know what's best for them or what we know—we can possibly know what they need.... The whole, the whole condom fiasco and ... with the AIDS education it made me, it really, like I came away from that realizing ... we did that because we thought, we knew what these girls needed to learn about sex education and we also did it ... like, we also did it because ... because...

Chris: *Cause I was there....*

Ginger: *Yeah and ... we learned a lot from that [laughs]. When we talk about popular education being a, like a spiral model where we start from what we know and move out, spiral out—we did not start with what the girls know! We did not start with where they were with that. We dropped a bomb on them [laughs]. And ... and so I think we learned a lot about that.... I have a lot of ideas about how I would do things differently....*

Popular education and consciousness-raising were not meant to advance pre-set and outsider-identified goals. And, as Kathleen pointed out, it was not conceived for working with 11- to 13-year-old girls who had not agreed to our goals or motivation beforehand.

Kathleen: *I think about the popular education model ... I think sometimes there's definitely way more going on inside of my head.... This is what they mean [when they say that] popular education with adults is different than popular education with youth.... When I was growing up, there was a lot of stuff going on in my head that no one spoke about. And that maybe, they spoke about a lot later.... And I remember wishing I had information way before it was given to me.... I was scared because I didn't have it, I didn't have the*

language to think about it and I thought maybe: “everybody already knows, and I don't know.” And so, in that sense I think, the popular education model failed.

Trying to figure out what girls knew, what they wanted to know, and what they should know, did not always work. There was a fine line between following the girls’ lead—the girls did ask facilitators questions about sexuality—and pushing our own learning agenda in the school, sometimes at the girls’ expense. While our intention was to challenge paternalistic attitudes towards girls, we also reproduced patriarchy.

Facilitators had to negotiate between what the school wanted (keep girls busy and out of trouble), what the supporting NGO wanted (advance its mission to support girls in participating fully in society and in creating social change), what we wanted (advance social justice for girls³ in their school and community; feel good about ourselves), and what the girls wanted (a place to hang out).

Ginger: *Like, the project has an objective you know, it also has a responsibility to meet that objective to ... the administration of the school which it promised to do so and possibly the funders.... So that opened up a ... question for me of ... what's more important ... what's wrong with just sitting down with the girls and saying what do you want to do today?*

Ginger: *I think sometimes I see myself prioritizing the programming above all ... and ... trying to manage the space ... in some way to make sure that the programming gets executed, no matter what.*

The NGO’s objectives therefore, were a kind of authority, imposed from the outside and enforced from

the inside by myself and Kathleen, keeping facilitators and girls from changing the course of the project.

The practice of popular education was conceived as a facilitated dialogue with “the oppressed” (Freire). It is a pedagogy that was influenced by Marxist and Christian ideals (Mayo). Feminist consciousness-raising practice, and the Girls’ Project, were working from a different

opened to attend the same university as Kathleen, were cycling naked in the vicinity of the school. The neighbourhood kids were understandably very curious and, once the cyclists had put their clothes back on, they ended up having a discussion with them. One of the naked cyclists told the children that she was queer and that one of the Girls’ Project facilitators was also a lesbian. Now

er violently against one participant, who was verbally and physically threatened when her friend outed her to her high school peers.

Facilitating healthy sexuality work-shops and being visibly queer did not sufficiently challenge the heteronormative school environment. By the time we were facing overt homophobia in and out of the Girls’ Project, it was too late to

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set of assumptions—the underlying belief was that when women come together to share their experiences, they learn from one another and act to improve their situation. Experience and research has taught us that this is not always the case (Anzaldúa and Moraga; Foley). It is important to note, however, that feminist consciousness-raising groups were not meant to be led by facilitators; they were traditionally directed by the participants themselves. In many ways, the Girls’ Project was a form of social experiment with real live girls as objects. It was not successful as a hybrid model of popular education and consciousness-raising. This is not a matter of correctly applying a particular methodology but a matter of imagining possible ways of creating a more emancipatory practice that is shared among adult women and girls. But before I move on to discuss possibilities, I want to look at another Girls’ Project incident and identify some of the lessons learned.

Incident #2: Girls’ Project Facilitators are Gay

On a quiet Sunday afternoon, for reasons unknown, two young women, who oddly enough just hap-

pened to attend the same university as Kathleen, were cycling naked in the vicinity of the school. The neighbourhood kids were understandably very curious and, once the cyclists had put their clothes back on, they ended up having a discussion with them. One of the naked cyclists told the children that she was queer and that one of the Girls’ Project facilitators was also a lesbian. Now armed with hot information, the youth went to tease Shauna (one of the Girls’ Project participants) for hanging out with *lesbos*. Shauna, who may have wanted to save face in front of her friends, intercepted Kathleen and Ginger during a meal at a local restaurant. Loudly, she asked if they were lesbians: “Like two girls fucking.” Shauna is taller and wider than Kathleen and Ginger and can be quite intimidating at times. Her friends, who were not Girls’ Project participants, were with her. Because Ginger lived in the same neighbourhood as Shauna and her friends, both facilitators were very concerned and frightened. At the next Girls’ Project activity homophobic comments and general curiosity were rampant.

The facilitators, Ginger and Kathleen in particular, learned that being identified as queer in an elementary school and in certain communities is dangerous. We were learning that no one, not even facilitators, were safe from attack. The Girls’ Project may have been safer than the schoolyard, but for anyone who looked like they might be queer, there was no safety in or outside of the project. Some girls were being called “lesbos,” and during the Girls’ Project in 2005, we saw homophobia manifest rath-

adequately and proactively address these issues. We didn’t know how to proceed in addressing these issues in a school setting. Had we explicitly addressed homophobia at the beginning of the school year, we would have faced the possibility of being shut down by irate parents and a conservative school system. Yet, as we found out, silence did not offer protection either.

As Kathryn Morris-Roberts, who researched friendship groups in a U.K. school, explains, “even if schools are not formally talking about ‘it’ in the classroom, sexuality, hetero and homo, is definitely a ‘hot topic’ of conversation within student cultures” (223). Through our silence, we “potentially colluded with and perpetuated the construction of the school as a site of ‘compulsory heterosexuality’” (220). None of the facilitators had come out as gay and we had not talked about sexual orientation at all in the Girls’ Project. It was an underground issue that no one addressed. A gap existed between the safe space we were trying to create and the silence that contributed to the presence of *queer facilitators* being viewed as threatening or problematic and queer participation being silenced.

Learning about the danger of be-

ing out in an elementary school was a difficult lesson for the facilitators and for the girls who were teased and harassed for participating in the project. The school did nothing to address this overt homophobia. While the supporting NGO and the school had to deal with parents and liability concerns when such crises arose, their personal safety was never at risk. The girls and facilitators found themselves dealing with safety issues on their own. How did facilitators deal with these incidents and did we rely on our learning to affect change?

Inhibiting Praxis

While critical incidents fuelled the most important lessons, they were extremely difficult and unsafe moments for facilitators and for girls—the least powerful in mobilizing the support needed to transform these situations. This meant that facilitators faced crises repeatedly, which was demoralizing; we often questioned our ability to effect *any* meaningful change. We also blamed ourselves, our lack of skills and training. Since most of the facilitators were experienced group facilitators, I shift the focus to the environmental and social obstacles. Facilitators were working with few resources and were expected to meet many objectives. Expecting us to influence participants with one-hour weekly activities within a seven-month period was unrealistic. Our interventions were ineffective in challenging systems of oppression because they focused on transforming individual girls' thoughts and behaviours—girls who had not agreed to this emancipatory agenda.

Focusing on individual girls, their realities, and our own shortcomings as facilitators diverted attention from institutionalized homophobia and power imbalances between the school, the NGO, paid and voluntary facilitators, and the girls. Individualizing the obstacles we were facing meant we could man-

age them. As the following passage illustrates, patience was an accommodating response to oppression:

Ginger: I'm trying to ... answer the question ... how do we practice patience in that space? And ... when I think of myself as being part—of course I practice patience in that space!... We have to! I've learned a lot of patience in the past month with ... with shit going down with Shauna [reference to the gay-bashing]. And ... I've learned to be patient with myself. To forgive myself and that kind of thing. But when I think about patience—like patient self ... I picture calm, serenity. And when I think about the Girls' Project space that's not what I see at all.

When Ginger says “we have to” practice patience in the project, she is making reference to the fact that no matter how difficult things got, we still needed to facilitate next week's workshop. The girls, the school and the NGO counted on us.

Our method of coping thereby included selective awareness of our environment; we overlooked a great deal in order to continue to facilitate the project. One example of this selectivity was around the issue of group size. Small groups worked better for girls and facilitators. Every time we facilitated small group activities (when half of the girls were playing a soccer game, for example), girls were much more engaged and responsive. Yet, because of the limited availability of facilitators, lack of funding, and the large number of girls who had signed up, we chose to facilitate larger group activities. These attempts often resulted in a crisis. Each time, we would discuss the need for smaller groups. Selectivity was a strategic response to conditions that were not going to change; it was a way to keep going in the face of the contradictions within our practice.

What is interesting is the ways in

which facilitators suppressed action on what we knew—we inhibited our praxis. Furthermore, by imposing our own objectives, and those of the supporting NGO, rather than developing common objectives with the girls involved, we excluded the possibility of transformational change. Yet all is not lost and there is no need to become paralyzed by our own critique. Our praxis provides clues to working more closely with girls as equals on issues of social justice.

Opening the Agenda

From facilitators' perspective, the Girls' Project was a site of resistance where both accommodation and dissent took place and where we struggled within and against the school and NGO who were purportedly supporting us. It was also a site of learning. We learned about our complicity with and resistance to oppression; we learned about the limits of the method we were using and the need to “sit down with the girls and [say]: what do you want to do today?” That is, the need for opening up our agendas.

What does it mean to work with an open agenda? Based on my experience and research, I argue that it is possible to rally girls and young women around the issue of violence (or any other social justice issue) while insisting that objectives and plans of action be elaborated together. This would involve being clear about the intention behind the invitation to participate in a discussion or a group such as the Girls' Project. Girls participating in the project would know what they were getting into from the start. One of the problems with the Girls' Project was that facilitators would often surprise girls with activities that touched on very sensitive subjects without having their prior consent and without providing enough time to fully process the discussion before classes resumed. In an open process, girls would be invited to discuss vio-

lence—they would choose to come and would be given time to prepare. Everyone involved would have an opportunity to share their concerns and bring forward ideas, theories and experiences and together we would elaborate a way forward.

This methodology requires that adult women think differently about girls. I strongly encourage us to break out of traditional ways of thinking about adolescence as a “preparatory stage to adulthood” and about young people as psychologically and economically dependent on adults (Gaines). This ideology is the backdrop for numerous NGO, government, and even private sector interventions into girls’ and young women’s lives. While the Girls’ Project meant to challenge some of this thinking, it was also invested in it—program funding is for the most part given to work with girls who are defined as being “at risk” (Canadian Women’s Foundation). Girls cannot be objects of adult women’s “emancipatory desires” and of liberatory pedagogies that are ultimately “intrusive, invasive, pressured” (Lather 143). Very few grassroots initiatives actually leave room for girls to be autonomous and self-advocating. Fewer give them power in the organizations that serve them (for a notable exception see www.justiceforgirls.org). I urge us to enter into genuine dialogue with girls in order to identify a mutual course of reflection and action. Unless we are willing to counter our own imposed agendas, and those of the organizations within which we work, and unless we are willing to give up some of the power we have as adults, we will be impediments rather than catalysts for change. There is a crying need to courageously open the agenda. Learning is only an important element of feminist practice in as much as we transform it into liberatory action.

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¹All names have been changed to protect the identity of facilitators and girls involved in the project.

²Facilitators volunteered according to their school and personal schedules, which varied.

³Mainly we wanted girls to feel good about who they were. We also wanted them to be treated fairly by the school, to feel safe at home and in their community, and to know that being different is okay.

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