

THE CHALLENGES OF BEING A GIFTED GIRL.

*WHY ARE WE LED TO BELIEVE WE
CAN DO ANYTHING WHEN WE
ACTUALLY CAN'T?*

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BACKGROUND: FEMINISM

- early feminists began to fight for women's rights and equal opportunity in the late 19 century/early 20 century – women sought recognition of their ability to contribute and their voice to comment.
- the movement continued to grow, with women seeking more opportunity, more chances to achieve and more recognition of their abilities, becoming more dissatisfied with their lives.

(Friedan, 1963)

BACKGROUND:FEMINISM

- second wave feminists focussed on power, the capacity to dominate, voice, freedom from oppression – wanting to be seen as the same as men.
- issues of class and opportunity with part of the movement fighting for women from across the social spectrum. It was about being free to choose, and fulfilling one's potential. *(hooks, 1984)*

BACKGROUND:FEMINISM

- third wave feminism emerged as the daughters of earlier feminists grew and wanted different options – they wanted to make the choice to be feminine, to be individuals and have the best of all worlds.
- women were not the same as men but different – celebrating the differences and honouring them.

(Gilligan, 1982; Belenky, 1986)

BACKGROUND: FEMINISM

- post modern feminism is about openness – multiple ways of being and doing, diversity is celebrated. Personal identity shapes one to be an individual. (*Tong, 1989; Shreve, 1989*)
- different waves of feminism co-exist – girls make choices with different pressures from older women and diverse images on the screen, in magazines, through popular culture.

BACKGROUND: POPULAR CULTURE

- a powerful source of social mores – providing role models, characters who appear to achieve what women dream for. (*Harris, 2004; Corliss & McDowell, 2001; Inness, 1999; Tebbel, 2000*)
- women are confident, beautiful, well groomed, manipulative, focussed on appearance and images.
(*Dowes & Harrison, 1985; Bunbury, 1994; Mann, 1994*)
- interpreted in different ways by individual girls, reflecting their experience and background.
(*Walkerdine, 1990*)

THE SETTING

- A regional city in NSW Australia – 250 km from the nearest large metropolitan centre. An education and agricultural centre.
- 2 high school campuses – neither runs a gifted program or identifies gifted students formally.
- Girls in year 7 (age 12 years) and year 10 (age 15 years)

THE PARTICIPANTS

- 31 girls: 17 in Year 7 21 in year 10
- Year 10: identified through state wide testing – top 20% of age in state
- Year 7: identified after entry testing for high school. In top cohort of year 7.
- None had been identified before though all were recognised anecdotally as bright girls.

THE CONVERSATIONS

- Data are the responses to two questions that were part of the focus group discussion.
- **What does it mean to be smart?**
- **How are intelligent women shown in popular culture?**

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE SMART?

P: it's kind of like you know all the answers in everything and you are in all the top classes ...

P: like you actually try and do stuff...

P: you actually think about what you're going to do, you don't actually just do it. You think about what you are going to do and what might happen.

P: you actually want to have a life, not like being dropped into every type of job...

Transcripts of Focus group 2, year 7 cohort.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE SMART?

P: ..I explain things to him and I'm sort of glad that I can actually know and I understand and it takes a layer of stress off my shoulders. I actually get this and like you sit there, seeing other people stressing, oh my God I can't do it, I don't understand this and it's like, I'm so glad that I don't actually have to have that extra.

P: but they see a such duller world than we do. I bet all of us have so many hopes and aspirations as to what to do and how to go in life and people like that, no offence if anyone wants to do this, but they can't particularly see themselves leaving [town] or going to uni or anything.

DISCUSSION 1

- These statements indicate that these gifted girls, newly identified as gifted, demonstrate a sense of being different to others, a sense of purpose and a confidence in themselves to manage their school work and achieve their goals.
- This appears in these statements to support the literature that describes girls in this way. Are these girls challenged?

DISCUSSION 1:2

- Gifted adolescents feel different from their peers and this may impact on their social relationships, (*Bain & Bell, 2004; Neihart, 1998*) although there is literature that presents both viewpoints.
- Gifted girls have an increasingly diminished sense of their ability and confidence over the period of high school (*Preckel & Bull, 2008; Neumeister & Rinker, 2006; Dai, 2002; Kline & Short, 1998*)

DISCUSSION 1:3

- Gifted girls have a higher locus of control and a greater sense of personal autonomy
(Brody & Benbow, 1986; Wong, 2000)
- Girls look to the future more positively and are more confident. They may have a different world view to other girls their own age
(Tirri & Ubani, 2004; Mello & Worrell, 2006; Cross et al, 2008)

HOW ARE INTELLIGENT WOMEN SHOWN IN POPULAR CULTURE?

P: they are also portrayed as people who don't have many friends, sometimes.

P: they are like outcasts, because they are intelligent.

P: and they also seem to portray women as they, if they are intelligent that they are really shut off to the world, and they just don't want to love anyone...

P: they are ice cold.

P: ..there's always a situation or something that she figures out.

P: she's the one that fixes it.

P: she's the assistant and she always knows what she's doing and she doesn't seem like an idiot.

Transcripts of Focus Group 3, Year 10 cohort.

HOW ARE INTELLIGENT WOMEN SHOWN IN POPULAR CULTURE?

P: Smart people aren't always that popular because like, maybe they're smart but no-one wants to hang out with them ...

P: desperate women, just trying to find a husband pretty much and that was like just the theme of the movie and it ran through the whole thing that women have to find a husband and no matter how desperate they are, they will, I don't know, they were theorising about how woman need a man to survive and will always need a man to survive and I just didn't think it was a very fair portrayal.

HOW ARE INTELLIGENT WOMEN SHOWN IN POPULAR CULTURE?

P: yeah, like the movie that has just come out recently, the Ugly Truth, she was like a successful, single person and when she found out you know she rang that guy on TV or whatever...she changed herself so that she did turn unto a bimbo. Like she wasn't one and then she changed herself to be one so that she could get a man and you know, like she could fit into society.

Transcripts of Focus Group 3, year 7 cohort.

DISCUSSION 2

- the girls see that the images presented contradict the ideas of feminism – stressing that women need to be feminine and aim to get a man (*Downs & Harrison, 1985; Mann, 1994; Tebbel, 2000; Bunbury, 1994*)
- they also see images that present clever women as the fixer- but these are the ‘assistants’ - not the main character. (*Signorelli, 1999*)

DISCUSSION 2:2

- the girls seem to be able to critically watch and know that these are constructions and real life is different.
- but they did not find the portrayal of intelligent women positive- which discourages them from claiming the identity.
- reinterpret the visual texts in the context of their lives (*Walkerdine, 1990*) – concern that gifted is presented as not acceptable.

CONCLUSION: HOW ARE GIFTED GIRLS CHALLENGED?

- Popular culture does form a central part of their lives, and provides them with ideas about behaviour, expectation and achievement.
- It does not present a view of academic intelligence, rather practical intelligence and problem solving.
- Mixed messages mean some identity confusion – choosing which role to play.

CONCLUSION: HOW ARE GIFTED GIRLS CHALLENGED?

- They see successful women revert to feminine behaviours to get a man- a confusing message to address when in a rural context they do not experience role models of gifted women achieving in non-traditional roles.
- This is the challenge: knowing their options and being supported in taking on non-traditional ones that allow them to achieve their potential.

THE CHALLENGE OF BEING A GIFTED GIRL.

For references: see handout.

Thank you.

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