

Developing a Local Framework for Teen Girls' Empowerment in KwaMhlanga, South Africa

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In the month of July 2016, 20 teen girls from the Manaleni Achievement Center (MAC), an afterschool center, in KwaMhlanga, South Africa, met with the researcher for a Participatory Action Research project. The project intended to explore girls' empowerment from the perspective of teen girls, and the ways the MAC could work to empower their population of teen girls. Organizational leadership identified this issue as an area of weakness in the organization and as a place of disconnect between the MAC and the population of teen girls in the KwaMhlanga community. The MAC was succeeding in retaining enrollment of teen boys but was having a difficult time keeping teen girls engaged and enrolled in programming. It was also generally accepted by organizational leadership that teen girls faced greater social and peer pressure in their community, and seemed to be less confident and participatory than the boys in the programming at the MAC. To retain more teen girls and better support and engage the teen girls attending the MAC, the organization asked the researcher to work with the girls to better understand what the MAC could do to promote teen girls' empowerment.

To address this issue the researcher adopted a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach, which was appropriate for this subject because of the research population and the topic of empowerment. PAR is innovative because it flips the traditional research power structure on its head and looks to the research population, who would typically be considered subjects, as experts, agents, and leaders in the research.¹ Children, and especially female children in patriarchal societies, are silenced. Children are usually not viewed as agents or as affecting as much change in their communities as adults. However, children and teens make decisions and shape their worlds in their own way, and youth can be agents of change. Using PAR had the potential to be especially impactful with the research population of teen girls at the MAC, because by centering the research on their experience and authority, the research validated their perspectives and voices and acknowledged them as change agents. Additionally, the researcher chose PAR because of its reversal of the teacher/student power dynamic. As a representative of a western academic institution, the researcher was aware that their presence would be authoritative, and was cautious of imposing a framework of empowerment that represented their own ideas of empowerment and the local context, instead of the ideas of the community.² PAR was adopted to mitigate some of the researcher's authority and power, in the hopes of creating a more democratic research framework.

Most importantly, PAR was chosen as the approach to this research because of its capacity to be empowering. By re-centering the research process around the perspectives and inquiries of the research subjects by making them the researchers, PAR had the potential to elevate the voices of the teen girls at the MAC and make their voices authoritative and ideas heard. The UN defines empowerment as "an iterative process with key components including an enabling environment that encourages

¹ Kapoor, D., & Jordan, S. *Education, participatory action research, and social change: International perspectives*. (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 73

² Cammarota, J., & Fine, M. *Revolutionizing education: Youth participatory action research in motion*. (New York, NY: Routledge), 6

popular participation in decision-making that affects the achievement of goals.”³ By making the teen girls at the MAC researchers of their own context, PAR was able to involve them in a process that “encouraged popular participation in decision-making,” and in making recommendations to the organization at the end of the research, the teen girls were able to help create and contribute to the fulfillment of organizational goals.

The research was conducted in five hour-long sessions with approximately 20 teen girls. The organizational leadership at the MAC set the initial research objectives, but the teen girls decided the flow and direction of the research. The researcher planned and facilitated participatory exercises to help the students think about the research questions and generate discussion. In the first session the students worked with placards that featured different concepts related to empowerment: respect, self-esteem, personal value, etc. The students rearranged, attached, and unattached the different placards, drawing meaning between the different concepts and discussing their linkages. This first exercise immediately changed the initial framework for research by shaping the language used to talk about empowerment. The girls used the word “empowerment” to describe the process of being emotionally built up by an external source, for example being motivated by a good leader, or being encouraged by kind words from a good friend. For the teen girls, empowerment was less of an internal process of self-edification, and more of an emotional reaction to external factors. This usage was likely informed by the weekly life-skills discussions the MAC staff conducts with the teen girls and it was neither beneficial, nor in keeping with the principles of PAR, to change the language the girls were using, so the language of the research changed. The girls identified building positive self-esteem as a process of self-edification, and we reshaped the language of the research to language that made more sense to the teen girls, adopting the phrase ‘building positive self-esteem’ as the process the MAC was trying to encourage.

In the next session the teen girls contextualized positive self-esteem building in their own lives by drawing pictures of themselves at their most confident, with their highest self-esteem. They drew pictures of themselves playing netball, spending time with friends, achieving academically at school, wearing their favorite clothes, dancing, being in nature, and speaking confidently in front of a group. To continue thinking about what building positive self-esteem looked like, in our next conversation the students acted out a typical day in the life of a teen girl at the MAC, exploring how high self-esteem and low self-esteem impacted the girls’ day-to-day lives. The girls split into groups and were assigned by their peers a few activities from the average day of a teen girl at the MAC: going to school, going to the MAC, cooking dinner, studying, etc. Each group acted out their activities as if they had ‘low self-esteem’ and again with ‘high self-esteem’, and at the end the teen girls talked as a group about the major differences between the two. Communication and group-orientation were the two biggest differences between the ‘high self-esteem’ skits and ‘low self-esteem’ skits for the girls. They demonstrated in their skits that girls with high self-esteem are communicative and outwardly expressive, spending time thinking about the community around them in addition to themselves. The girls that acted out ‘high self-esteem’ were engaged and giving of themselves to their community and helped their peers, which indicated they thought they had something of value to offer to the people around them. The girls that acted out ‘low self-esteem’ were disengaged in their community and their studies and had a hard time communicating and connecting with others.

The researcher chose acting as the method for this exercise because it involved all of the students, not just the students that were confident speaking in front of their peers. It also helped to uncover some important ideas about self-esteem, and offered

³ United Nations Social Development Network

some potential avenues for the MAC to think about creating an environment that enables girls to build high self-esteem. One of the most important differences between the 'high self-esteem' skits and the 'low self-esteem' skits was the difference in communication. The teen girls at the MAC viewed communication and social engagement with the community as evidence of high self-esteem, which indicated that encouraging social inclusion and participation could be a key to building girls' positive self-esteem in the community. The other key difference between the two skits was that girls with high self-esteem felt like they were able to help their peers, which seemed to stem from a conviction that the 'helpers' had something of value that was worth offering to their community. The girls in the 'low self-esteem' skits were unable to care for themselves, but the girls that demonstrated high self-esteem were able to contribute to their community, which helped to further build their self-esteem. Service to community and peers for the girls at the MAC seemed to be a positive feedback loop: high self-esteem gave the girls conviction that they were able to help people around them, and service to their peers built their self-esteem. The group conversation about the skits ended with a brief discussion about the creation of high self-esteem, so the next session was planned to explore this topic.

In the next session the teen girls explored the 'building blocks' of positive self-esteem by creating lists of the actions, institutions, and social and cultural factors they believed contribute to self-esteem. The building blocks were closely related to identity and self-definition and featured institutions and groups with which the teen girls identify: cultural group, religion, family, etc. The conversation about these factors led to a conversation about application. In the next session the teen girls came up with examples of ways the MAC could use the 'building blocks' of positive self-esteem to build the self-esteem of their peers. Their answers were all different, but touched on some common themes. The teen girls split into groups to brainstorm and draw a vision of what the MAC could look like if it worked to build teen girls' self-esteem. The first group described a vision of the MAC becoming a place where the teen girls could work together, play together, and share skills. They described a MAC with more opportunities for teen girls to work together on school work, and teach each other new things. They heavily stressed building a culture of inclusivity at the MAC, and described a social environment where everyone could build relationships with new people, could include those that may be behind or left out, and could "help each other without judging each other's inadequacies." Group one's vision was the most conceptual and was most oriented around culture change.

The second group offered two programmatic suggestions. They thought that extra academic classes at the MAC that would help them succeed at school would build their self-esteem, and that having a facilitated conversation with girls from another afterschool center in the community would also contribute to building their self-esteem. The teen girls from group two proposed hosting a life skills discussion with teen girls from another center in the area to allow them to share their perspectives and experiences with a group of teen girls that are in a similar position, academically and socially. They described this as a good opportunity to share their ideas with a new group of people, which would give them confidence in public speaking. It could also have the outcome of expanding the girls' social networks and networks of support, because the visitors would be coming from a similar center and facing similar issues. The third group suggested the MAC start a book club for the teen girls. They thought this would help the girls develop their communication skills and academic competencies, and most importantly, would give the girls a place to be heard. One of the students explained, "a book club will allow us to voice our opinions and share as a group together." Because the girls at the MAC likely do not have a place where their thoughts and opinions are taken seriously, group three advocated creating a platform for the girls that would allow them to voice their thoughts and opinions and be heard, which they believed would contribute to the creation of positive self-esteem.

The fourth group thought the teen girls should help each other with homework, and they suggested the organization build a pool to create opportunities for social interaction between the students that would allow the students to become friends, and build positive relationships. They thought having a positive social platform at the MAC could prevent students from seeking out opportunities for “negative” social engagement, like parties or bars. In a community where the only platforms for social participation are church or bars, the teen girls in group four identified a deficit of safe, appropriate places for social engagement in their community, and presented a solution to that deficit. Although each of the groups presented a very different vision for the MAC, there were some recurring themes. One of the recurring themes was exposure to new ideas, skills, or opportunities. Every single group spoke about the potential of new opportunities to build girls’ self esteem by broadening their educational horizons. Another recurring theme was community building, both within the group, and within the larger community. All the girls’ groups thought that expanding their support and social networks would positively impact their self-esteem. Finally, most of the groups also talked about creating a culture of inclusivity and a place of ‘safe space’ at the MAC for the sharing of ideas, perspectives, and individual skills and passions.

This final conversation with the students was the most substantive for the organization in considering their opportunities to empower their teen girls because it laid out clear pathways to building teen girls’ self-esteem/empowerment, but it was also deeply important in fulfilling the goals of PAR. In their first conversations the girls redefined empowerment as building positive self-esteem and then created and acted out models of positive self-esteem. After critically examining those models and their commonalities, they identified the roots of positive self-esteem in their lives and community. Finally, the teen girls gathered their framework for building positive self-esteem by examining their findings from conversations one through four, and they applied their idea of what positive self-esteem looked like to their own context, using what resources were available to them at the organization. This was a process of self-definition and goal setting for their own community, and the recommendations posed by the teen girls in the final session were a realization of the teen girl's authority and applied knowledge of their own context. In this way, the research fulfilled the goals of PAR.

There were limitations to this research. Many of the teen girls in the population conducting the research were uncomfortable speaking English and were sometimes reluctant to talk with the researcher. The researcher used various methods to elicit conversation: drawing, theater games, diagramming, and group work, in an effort to include teen girls that were uncomfortable with English or speaking in front of their peers, but there was input missed because the research was conducted in a peer group, and because the researcher did not speak the local language. The goal of the research was to create a framework for understanding empowerment that came from the disempowered population, but the greater aim for the researcher in using PAR was to integrate the process of research with the desired outcome. The research approach intended to help the teen girls label, define, understand their own framework for empowerment, and then give them the space and the tools to realize that framework in the everyday operations of the MAC. This process not only created the desired framework for empowerment that will be used by the organization to help empower the girls, but the process itself was empowering and built the self-esteem of the girls that participated in it. This connected both the process and outcome of the research, and the girls’ findings from this research offer insights into empowerment and the creation of indigenous frameworks for development.

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