Stepp Reading Report 3: *Thinking Outside the Girl Box*

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*Thinking Outside the Girl Box: Teaming Up with Resilient Youth in Appalachia* (Spatig & Amerikaner, 2014) is a book about an evaluation research project that explores the journey of a youth development program for girls in Lincoln County, West Virginia. The story not only relates the challenges of the program and its participants and the program’s eventual demise, but also reveals the journey of the researchers participating in the project.

Chapter 1 introduces Ric McDowell and explains his relationship to the Girls Resiliency Program (GRP). Ric serves as a board member for the GRP and the chapter “explores the poverty of [Lincoln County] and of West Virginia generally” (p. 3) from his perspective as long-time youth development worker. Ric stresses the importance of longevity in youth development work noting that oftentimes programs come and go too quickly. He believed it was “important to develop *long-term* programs linking youth with adults who cared about them” (Spatig & Amerikaner, 2014, p. 14). Spatig and Amerikaner (2014) further discuss rurality, relationships, poverty, and stereotypes of the region from the GRP participants’ perspectives. Women in Appalachia are particularly challenged and tend to accept the traditional caretaking roles of wife and mother. The girls and young women who participated in the GRP are a product of this environment. In spite of traditional gender expectations, Spatig and Amerikaner (2014) explain that “the ‘girl box’ isn’t the same for every girl in this story” (p. 21). Each girl struggles with her own challenges, attachment to their home county, and the realization she might need to leave.

In Chapter 2, Spatig and Amerikaner (2014) acquaint us with Shelley Gaines, founder and director of the GRP. Shelley’s vision for the program was founded on capability. Oftentimes, youth are subjected to labels and stereotypes that essentially limit their capability, but Shelley wanted to focus on the resilience of youth. Spatig and Amerikaner (2014) provided Shelley’s own words from research field notes: “Resilience is the concept that people—youth, in this case—hold innate strengths and natural abilities that can be used to help them not only overcome challenges but become stronger and succeed … our core belief was that these youth were capable” (p. 34). Spatig admits that “Shelley’s vision of youth capability and her deep-seated optimism about what was possible” (P. 35) is what attracted her to this research project.

Shelley founded the GRP in 1996 and started the program with eight girls from one junior high school. With grant support from multiple sources, the program expanded in a few years to include more than sixty girls in three schools (Spatig & Amerikaner, 2014). The girls attending group discussions in their home schools but the program also provided opportunities for the girls to try new things. “They bowled, rafted, skated, gardened, went to amusement parks, swam, rappelled, and went camping” (Spatig & Amerikaner, p. 38). They also tried new foods, participated in art projects, community service, and action research.

In Chapter 3, Spatig and Amerikaner (2014) explore the transformation of Teresa’s “voice” through her experience in the GRP. She joined the program early and stayed until the program eventually collapsed. Early in her participation, she was “quiet, defensive, and withdrawn” (p. 48). After a few years, Teresa was described as “bubbly, outgoing, feisty, and confident” (p. 49). Her own words tell us that she believes she is smart and enjoys sharing her own ideas. Spatig and Amerikaner (2014) relate the importance of finding “voice” as a “way to push the boundaries of the ‘girl box’” (p. 50). Teresa’s transformation is symbolic of the transformation of many program participants. Participants were encouraged to explore and express their “voice” through a variety of outlets including writing, art, poetry, songwriting, and even research (Spatig & Amerikaner, 2014).

Chapter 4 documents the GRP experiences of Cassi, a participant who joined the program near its demise. Cassi’s story explores the importance of relationships in the success of the program. Through GRP activities, Cassi developed a meaningful relationship with a pottery teacher who was a part-time GRP staff member (Spatig & Amerikaner, 2014). Cassi explains the importance of this relationship in a college admissions essay. She relates her failures with any type of art project that she had previously experienced and her fascination with pottery that was inspired by her teacher. In her words, she shared that she “knew this was art for me. It was nothing like the class I had taken at school. As time went on, I began to separate pottery from art. Art was frustration and heartbreak. Pottery was freedom and joy” (Spatig & Amerikaner, 2014, p. 73). Like Teresa’s transformation, Cassi’s experience was also symbolic of participant experiences. The girls were challenged to try many things they didn’t think they could do, including building a house for Habitat for Humanity (Spatig & Amerikaner, 2014).

We are introduced to Irene and Virginia in Chapter 5. Both were GRP participants who eventually joined the GRP staff. Spatig and Amerikaner (2014) wrote that “[t]he idea of having former participants become staff members to increase their ownership of a program is a goal often discussed in the nonprofit world, yet one that is surrounded by some tension” (p. 99). Should emphasis on hiring staff be placed on experience or training? While Irene and Virginia were able to relate the experiences of the GRP participants, they lacked formal training. Shelley wanted to maintain a staff of former participants because of their ability to relate to the participants and the level of trust they could achieve, but she also believed that their connection to the community would keep them there (Spatig & Amerikaner, 2014). The authors suggest that that timing and training were factors in the poor transition from participant to staff. While Irene managed to weather the transition, Virginia and another employee left the program abruptly.

Spatig and Amerikaner (2014) reflected on the frequent program turnover and Shelley’s desire to hire local women. “The named benefits of having outsiders as staff often reflected an assumption that only nonlocal individuals could have education and formal training for this kind of work” (Spatig & Amerikaner, 2014, p. 111). From Shelley’s perspective, Spatig and Amerikaner (2014) recount that an “[o]verdependence on outside, formally trained individuals flies in the face of the positive youth development philosophy, whereas moving former participants into leadership positions is the ultimate in realizing the capabilities and assets of youth, in expanding the ‘girl box,’” (p. 113).

Chapter 6 discusses the roles of LeAnne Olson and Betty Sias who were graduate student researchers with the project. While Betty’s efforts concentrated on the development of a Boys’ Resiliency Program implemented near the collapse of the GRP, LeAnne’s research centered on the GRP participants’ experiences (Spatig & Amerikaner, 2014). The chapter also investigates three factors that contributed to the demise of the GRP: “(1) the overreliance on a single individual, namely Shelley Gaines; (2) declining funds for nonprofit work generally and specifically for projects featuring social justice activism for girls; and (3) untimely and underresourced program expansions” (Spatig & Amerikaner, 2014, p. 6). Shortly after LeAnne joined the research project as part of her own dissertation research, the GRP program closed down. For her own research, it was essential for her to continue meeting with the girls who had been program participants (Spatig & Amerikaner, 2014). “Increasingly, the research and the programming become indistinguishable” (Spatig & Amerikaner, 2014, p. 125). LeAnne’s research notes stated that she “found [herself] alone with the girls, which at times was an uneasy, even disturbing, experience” (Spatig & Amerikaner, 2014, p. 126). Eventually, LeAnne developed relationships with these girls “that went far beyond those of typical researchers and subjects” (Spatig & Amerikaner, 2014, p. 126).

Five GRP participants are featured in Chapter 7. The chapter focuses primarily on Ashley, but discusses the struggles of Ashley, Cassi, Jennifer, Sara, and Marycait as they approach higher education (Spatig & Amerikaner, 2014). The chapter discusses the varying levels of support within their homes, yet all five struggled with getting into college. LeAnne helped four of the five navigate their way into college, but the transition was not smooth (Spatig & Amerikaner, 2014).

Spatig and Amerikaner (2014) discuss their research methods in Chapter 8. The authors share their desire to conduct “research *with* people rather than *on* them” (pl. 167). Their collaborative ethnography took several years of research with several researchers who involved themselves in the GRP. The researchers observed participants and activities, conducted interviews, collected, and analyzed the data (Spatig & Amerikaner, 2014). The research purpose was to evaluate the GRP. For the participants, the research culminated in a presentation at Marshall University. “Featuring [the girls’] voices in the presentation was an important part of the experience for the girls. It honored them and their ideas” (Spatig & Amerikaner, 2014, p. 175). For the lead researchers, the book summed up the project. Spatig and Amerikaner (2014) surmised that “[e]ven though it closed, the GRP was a highly effective program” (p. 129).

In the preface, Spatig and Amerikaner (2014) mention two overarching themes addressed in the book. The first theme relates to “the meaning of community: how we *think* about community and how we *do* community” (p. xi). I believe the book highlights contradictions in these two actions. For example, the purpose of the GRP was providing an opportunity for rural young women to get beyond “the box,” explore their capabilities, and try new things. The narrative explores the rurality and poverty of their community and the feeling of being confined by their physical location as well as their stereotypes. Yet, many young women choose to conform to the role of wife and mother. The opposite was illustrated in the poem collectively written by GRP participants, “Lincoln County is my world. I love it. I’ll leave someday” (Spatig & Amerikaner, 2014, p. 27). In many instances throughout the book, Spatig and Amerikaner (2014) relate the participants’ disdain over the West Virginia and Appalachian stereotypes and the labels that have been placed upon them. In relation to the book title, there is also several discussions of “the box” in which society has placed and restrained these young Appalachian women.

The second theme is “about how researchers and policy makers evaluate community-based programs, how we define program success and effectiveness in an age of increasing emphasis on evidence-based best practice” (Spatig & Amerikaner, 2014, p. xi). The authors note that much of today’s research seeks to quantify program outcomes. Spatig and Amerikaner (2014) contend that such methods “provide useful information but rely on narrowly defined ideas about ‘successful’ outcomes (p. xiii). Spatig and Amerikaner (2014) relay the work of other researchers in the quest to determine what is successful in youth development programs. Spatig & Amerikaner, 2014) explain that community programs can be evaluated by comparing standards established by Roth and Brooks-Gunn. The standards include competence, confidence, connections, character, and compassion; youth-centered programs that encourage caring relationships with adults; and providing activities that encourage youth to experience new things. The GRP met most of the standards (Spatig & Amerikaner, 2014). These standards are not suited for quantification. The researchers could only evaluate the true experiences of the participants by becoming participants in their own right, not just an observer.

Throughout the last half of the book, I particularly noticed something I chose to call the “personal-ness” of the research project. Spatig particularly became very involved in not only the research but in the GRP itself. LeAnne Olson also became personally involved. Spatig and Amerikaner (2014) include this heading in Chapter 5: Brief Worrying Interlude (p. 96). The authors confess to feeling hesitant to write about the downfall of the program. On page 17, the authors acknowledge that “[t]his chapter of the story, the part where the GRP collapses, is hard to tell without worrying about stepping on toes and possibly hurting those who made huge contributions to the work.” We are reminded on page 125 that for LeAnne “the research and programming became indistinguishable.” Though Betty is only briefly mentioned in the text, she also became personally involved in her research of the Boy’s Resiliency Program. Spatig and Amerikaner (2014) relate that “Betty [asked] if I thought it would be okay if she and her husband bought a pig for a boy who needed it for a school-related farming project” (p. 126). Betty faced challenges similar to those LeAnne faced (Spatig & Amerikaner, 2014).

We typically see research as objective. Even in qualitative research the researcher is only expected to research, record, and compile an analysis. Personal notes are an aside. We do not typically expect the researcher to pass judgment. As a result of the collaborative ethnography, Spatig and Amerikaner (2014) expressed their judgment as part of the research findings. On page 129, our author express they were “increasingly uneasy about that decision” that the GRP would maintain a non-academic focus. The authors also express an uneasiness about the evaluation of *character* as illustrated by Roth and Brooks-Gunn. Spatig and Amerikaner (2014) noted that “the GRP encouraged specific values—such as respect, social responsibility, community engagement, as well as attention to inequalities of gender, sexuality, race, social class, rurality—and encouraged girls to apply them in their own lives. But Shelley viewed this as ‘adding skills’ to the girls’ ‘tool belts’ rather than building their character” (p. 131).

Discussion of the GRP curriculum is addressed throughout the book. As Spatig and Amerikaner (2014) assert in Chapter 8, one of the important missing elements is academic support. I think the absence of academic support is particularly evident in the discussion about mathematics and high school counseling/advising in Chapter 7. Each of the five college-bound GRP participants struggled with math and most garnered little support from lackadaisical high school guidance counselors. It seemed as if the counselors had accepted the Appalachian stereotypes and were bound to prove them true. Had the girls’ specific struggles been identified earlier in the GRP setting, it is likely that incorrect academic tracks could have been changed and math support could have been sought out early.

In my work with conditionally admitted students, I often work with rural Appalachian young men and women, but I also work with several urban students who attend Marshall on athletic scholarships. Their cultures and their stereotypes are very different; yet, the students are very much the same. Many of them share a fear of failure and letting down those that love them. Many experience homesickness. To most, Huntington is different and unfamiliar: much larger than home for the Appalachian students and much smaller than home for the urban students. But size isn’t the concern; it’s the different-ness of Huntington and the campus community. Most seek friendships, but there are quiet loners represented in the Appalachian students as well as the urban students. Most of them have not had the academic support they should have received in elementary and high school. I would dare to assume this occurs in both cultures for many of the same reasons outlined in Spatig and Amerikaner’s (2014) discussion of mathematics in Chapter 7: high teacher turnover because teachers don’t want to live in either area; lack of teacher commitment because they aren’t happy in their position, and teachers who have not specialized in the content areas they are teaching. Students of both cultures are considered to be “at risk,” a label that Spatig and Amerikaner (2014) warn us about because it is a limiter. Most of these students want to know that someone cares about them and whether or not they succeed or fail. I believe that desire is innate; it crosses cultural borders. While it is important to embrace their cultural differences, it is also important to find common ground by recognizing their similarities.

# **References**

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