growing boys

Implementing a Boys' Empowerment Group in an Afterschool Program

by Georgia Hall and Linda Charmaraman

The process of establishing a healthy male identity can be difficult for many boys. The limited definitions of masculinity available to boys and men are generally characterized by competition, repression of fear and emotion, and physical and emotional strength. Boys of color and those of lower economic status tend to encounter even fewer healthy alternatives for defining their maleness than do their white and better-off counterparts (Mid-Atlantic Equity Consortium, 2010).

In *Real Boys,* William Pollack (1998) says that our schools are failing to meet the needs of male students by paying too little attention to boys' issues and the challenges boys face in school. Adolescent boys whose communities are characterized by violence can be particularly vulnerable to aggressive and risky behaviors. According to Latzman and Swisher (2005), "Community violence destroys the notion that homes, schools and communities are safe places, and youths exposed to community violence have higher rates of emotional, behavioral, and cognitive problems" (p. 357).

Boys who need support in choosing positive and healthy pathways could benefit from an intervention that gives them space and time to share information, to work and play cooperatively, and to grow healthy identities. While inclusive grouping is an important part of building community in a youth development program, common-interest groups such as girls' or boys' empowerment groups can help members grow and support one another.

We conducted a case study of one such group, an afterschool empowerment group for middle school boys. Using elements of ethnographic study, we examined participants' reactions to the work they did together in the empowerment group and explored the characteristics that made the group leaders effective in facilitating that work. Our goal was to discover how a boys' empowerment group could help participants avoid risky behaviors such as joining a gang or engaging in interpersonal violence, while instead making healthier choices that could lead to positive growth.

Setting and Methods

During the 2009–2010 school year, we documented the experiences and interactions of a boys' empowerment group in an afterschool program located in a middle school in a large Northeastern city. This group began as

GEORGIA HALL, Ph.D., and **LINDA CHARMARAMAN**, Ph.D., are research scientists at the National Institute on Out-of-School Time, Wellesley Centers for Women, Wellesley College. Yi Zhang, NIOST research intern for 2009–2010, also made contributions to this study. Funding was provided by the Anne E. Borghesani Community Foundation.

part of an in-school healthy behaviors initiative sponsored by the city school district and later became part of an existing afterschool program in the same school building. At the time of our study, the empowerment group had been in existence for three years. It included about 15 boys ages 12–15 who, like the school population as a whole, were mostly African American. Facilitated by two young men whose positions were funded by the school district initiative, the group met weekly, providing group learning experiences, team-building activities, and special outings. Former members who had graduated were encouraged to return in order to mentor current members and to build on their relationships with the facilitators.

Between November 2009 and May 2010, we conducted five observations of group meetings and events, taking field notes that we later analyzed for emerging themes. We also interviewed two youth members and both staff members as well as conducted two focus groups with participants. We analyzed the transcripts of these meetings as we did the field notes. We obtained consent from both the youth and their parents for their participation, and we rewarded youth for their participation with a gift card to a local store.

Changing Participants' Mindsets

Boys in the empowerment group reported many positive impacts from their participation. Some boys said that group discussions and activities helped them reflect on their image in and out of school and on the tone of their relationships with teachers and peers. For example, one youth commented:

> You have to make a line for yourself and make a good track record. Last year in seventh grade, my track record was "big attitude/bad person." So I wanted to change my track record. Say something comes up missing in school; I am the first person they [the school administrators] will come up to. Or say someone comes to school with a black eye and doesn't want to tell how it happened because they are scared of saying, they will come to me. So that's what I realized… you have to change your track record and make yourself a better person.

Another boy explained how he was rethinking a negative interaction with a school day teacher.

> We were supposed to have a [boys' group] session, so that was the only thing on my mind, and I forgot about detention. So fifteen minutes into the session, my teacher came down and said, "You skipped detention today, and you skipped my class today." So I just start-ed yelling. Then he [the group leader] put his hand on my leg and told me to calm down. So, once the teacher left, he asked me why I did that. I used to think that, when you're having an argument with someone, the harder you talk, the more right you seem or something like that. So he showed me a different way of dealing with that. If I had said, "Oh, I'm sorry. I forgot. I'll serve that detention. I hope you forgive me," she might have changed her mind.

In interviews and focus groups, the boys consistently identified several ways that participation in the empowerment group had affected them. They believed the group had helped them to:
- Gain respect for authority figures
- Establish personal integrity and consistency among their values, actions, and principles
- See a path toward future success
- Manage their anger or pride
- Improve their academic performance
- Take responsibility for peers and help them stay out of trouble
- Build and maintain healthy friendships and relationships

The Right Leaders

One key to creating an empowerment group that can make a lasting difference in the development of adolescent boys is selecting the right adult leaders. In interviews, focus groups, and casual conversations, we asked empowerment group participants to describe the positive qualities they saw in their program leaders. Their responses were frequently embedded in stories about what it was like to be invited into and involved in the program or about how the facilitators helped them in a time of need. The boys said that their leaders:
- Showed their honest emotions
- Acted like fathers to us
- Understood our different moods, interests, abilities, and personalities
- Always had hope in us
- Were open to learning from us and valued our perspectives
- Got familiar with our struggles both in and out school
- Gave us one-on-one time
- Showed gentleness but also tough love
- Made us feel that we belonged and that we were special
- Made us feel it was a privilege to belong to the empowerment group

Finding the right adult leaders for an empowerment group can be challenging. The staff leader may be either an outside specialist who joins the afterschool program just to lead the empowerment group or a member of the regular program staff. In addition to general employment qualifications, program directors may look for additional personal and professional credentials as outlined below.

Demographic Characteristics

In order to communicate authentically and to receive emotional and social support, youth need to perceive a genuine and natural connection to group leaders. As a starting point, group leaders' gender, ethnic identification, and community background should reflect those of group participants. While these similarities do not guarantee effective group functioning, they provide a foundation on which to construct youth-staff relationships.

Experience in Creating Informal Curriculum

The boys' empowerment group we observed engaged in a loosely formed curriculum consisting of workshops, guest presentations, outings, and team-building exercises. This informal curriculum was well coordinated yet remained flexible in order to stay attuned to the group's development. Experienced facilitators can package an engaging and informative set of activities that will sustain the boys' attention and increase retention, while simultaneously giving participants opportunities to build confidence, interpersonal skills, and resiliency to help them avoid risky behaviors.

Communication Skills

Empowerment group leaders generally will be better prepared if they have experience working with young people as discussion group leaders, counselors, or coaches. The facilitator of a boys' group needs to be able to communicate with participants in an authentic way that will address boys' emotional and cognitive needs. At the same time, leaders need to manage group exercises, which often produce "teachable moments" in which facilitators must provide the boys with a safe space in which to explore their feelings and experiences. Wide-ranging familiarity with both one-on-one and group relationships, including conflict management skills, is a useful qualification.

Connections to Outside Resources

Knowledge of and experience in the local community position a group leader to leverage additional resources to benefit youth. Ideally, facilitators not only will understand that it takes a village to prevent youth violence and risky behav-

iors, but also will work to connect youth with community mentors. A facilitator's personal connections with other youth- and family-serving organizations can make youths' transitions between support networks less intimidating. For instance, the facilitators in the group we studied invited the boys to local church services with the approval of the parents. These connections gave the boys access to more adults who could "look out for them" in the neighborhood. A facilitator's experience with local organizations and willingness to serve as a bridge can help youth to make meaningful connections in their local communities.

Experience as a Participant

Our study made it clear that "leading with the heart" plays a role in effective group facilitation. Group leaders recalled stories of how caring organizations and devoted mentors helped them through their own adolescent struggles in an environment similar to that of group participants. These memorable formative experiences gave facilitators firsthand understanding of how critical a supportive network of mentors can be in a boy's development. These group leaders had hope for, and could inspire hope in, the boys they worked with because of their personal experiences.

Making a Difference in Boys' Lives

Establishing and supporting a boys' empowerment group in an afterschool program has its challenges. Good facilitators can be hard to find, and building the necessary group environment can take time. Our findings on the benefits of participation in a boys' empowerment group suggest that these steps are valuable and worthwhile. Boys in the empowerment group we studied lived daily in a delicate balance between safety and harm across a host of domains—physical, emotional, social, academic. We saw some of them experience dramatic changes in their attitudes toward school and relationships. When a boys' empowerment group is done right—and has the right leadership—it can change lives.

References

Latzman, R., & Swisher, R. (2005). The interactive relationship among adolescent violence, street violence, and depression. *Journal of Community Psychology*, *33*(3), 355–371.

Mid-Atlantic Equity Consortium. (2010). *Adolescent boys: Statistics and trends.* Retrieved from http://www.maec.org/boys.html

Pollack, W. (1998). *Real boys: Rescuing our sons from the myths of boyhood.* New York, NY: Henry Holt.