

Empowering GO-GIRL Teacher Mentors More Than a Chance to “Give Back”

by Linda Pincham

Abstract

Roosevelt University students in elementary and secondary education, mathematics, and psychology served as mentors to groups of seventh-grade girls in the GO-GIRL Program during two spring semesters. This brief, descriptive essay will address the overall impact of mentoring on student mentors in the GO-GIRL Program, particularly what the education majors report they have gained from mentoring that emphasizes the utility of such mentoring experience for education students.

Introduction and Overview

Wow! What a ride—an amazing ride, though. The girls were wonderful. As said many times during our speeches, waking up for ten Saturdays was hard. But week to week, it became easier. I am going to miss my fellow peers and my mentees. If offered the opportunity, I would complete this program again. It was worthwhile, and I know I made a difference!

—Roosevelt University mentor

That was a typical comment from the Roosevelt University (RU) student mentors who participated in the GO-GIRL (Gaining Options: Girls Investigate Real Life) Program. Asked about mentoring school-age children, mentors typically commented that the benefits of mentoring that age group tend to be far more than a chance or opportunity “to give back” and that they often find their relationships with their mentees mutually beneficial (Saunders

2003). Mentors and their mentees tend to develop relationships that typically bring change and positive impact to their own lives (*Mentor* n.d.). The mentoring component in the GO-GIRL Program did just that, and comments and reactions from the RU student mentors mirror the above testimonial.

The GO-GIRL Program was originally developed by faculty and staff of the University of Michigan and of Wayne State University. The National Science Foundation (NSF) funded the program as part of an initiative to increase the number of women, minorities, and persons with disabilities who participate in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics fields. Roosevelt University became one of five partners in a dissemination grant funded by NSF. At Roosevelt University, the GO-GIRL Program became a two-year program in Chicago during the 2006 and 2007 spring semesters. RU aspired to mirror the successful GO-GIRL model that brought together urban girls from diverse backgrounds to apply mathematics, data literacy, and scientific methods to social science research.

Program Participants and Their Mentors

Seventh-grade girls from the Chicago metropolitan area were recruited to participate in the project. Undergraduate and graduate elementary and secondary education, psychology, and mathematics majors enrolled at RU served as mentors. Research supports the value of individual mentoring as well as group formats in developing one-on-one relationships to promote positive peer interactions (Lawrence et al. 2008). This GO-GIRL Program utilized both formats. Small groups of seventh-grade girls were randomly selected for each mentor, who worked with a peer partner. However, at RU each mentor also established one-on-one relationships with each girl in her or his group.

Seventh-grade Girls. In spring 2006, the program consisted of twenty-six girls: thirteen participants were African American and thirteen were Latina. In spring 2007, the program consisted of eighteen girls: fourteen participants were African American, two were Latina, and two were Caucasian. The girls attended the Chicago Public Schools or surrounding suburban and private, parochial schools.

RU Mentors. Many RU mentors were personally recruited by the author, who served as the program director. They were also enrolled in a university course, Adolescent Girls in Theory and Practice. Advertisements to enroll in the course as well as the program were sent to the psychology, women's studies, and education departments. Mentors had to register for the course to receive credit for three semester hours. As a result, the spring 2006 semester produced nine

mentors, seven African Americans and two Caucasians. This group ironically included two males, one a graduate in secondary education biology and the other an undergraduate in early childhood education. The other seven mentors were female: one undergraduate in secondary mathematics, two undergraduates in psychology, two in elementary education, one graduate in secondary English, and one in secondary business. Two female undergraduate majors in secondary biology and mathematics occasionally visited the program as volunteers. During the spring 2007 semester, there were six female mentors: four African American, one Latina, and one Caucasian. In that group, there were one graduate in secondary business, one graduate in secondary biology, one graduate mathematics major, one graduate psychology major, one undergraduate psychology major, and one undergraduate secondary English major.

Although the course was offered in RU's College of Education, the course attracted class members of diverse professional training backgrounds; the education students learned and reflected upon their experiences in classes with members who varied by gender, disciplinary background, and educational major.

Learning about Early Adolescent Girls

In the stage of development between childhood and adulthood we call adolescence, the young female inevitably experiences a wide range of complex changes—physically, emotionally, and socially. Historically, middle school has been identified as a critical time for girls to define their careers and social identities. Research by the American Association of University Women (AAUW) reported declines in adolescent girls' self-esteem and academic achievement during the middle-school years (AAUW 1992). Orenstein (1995) noted a general drop in school performance among girls in the transition from childhood to early adolescence. Therefore, it is crucial to establish programs such as GO-GIRL to assist young girls in developing healthy and positive self-esteem.

To develop a sense of efficacy in the RU students who served as mentors in the GO-GIRL Program, mentors engaged in two important activities: first, they enrolled in Adolescent Girls in Theory and Practice, the course mentioned above, and second, they engaged in weekly group processing and discussions about their role in mentoring, successes, and concerns with their mentees. Beginning with the fifth week of each semester, the student mentors worked concurrently in the course and the project.

The Importance of Mentoring: Experiential Teaching

After each GO-GIRL Program session, the student mentors were involved in a thirty-minute group processing activity with the program director-instructor. Mentors shared their successes and problem-solved concerns they experienced with their mentees. They also received and reviewed their roles as lead discussants for the next week's topic, assigned by the director-instructor.

However, successful mentoring requires that mentor candidates understand the nature of mentoring. A majority of the student mentors was education majors who had previously worked and associated with school-age children; however, along with teaching concepts within their small mentor groups, the student mentors were also given ample opportunity to develop their large-group leadership and teaching skills. Each week, they were individually assigned different topics to conduct with the whole group of girls. They led whole-group discussions, often using PowerPoint presentations, overheads, or blackboards and other visual aids for instructional support. They were also assigned to lead warmup or icebreaker activities at the beginning and midpoint of each day.

The education majors thrived on the additional opportunities and exposures of teaching and felt their skills were enhanced. One mentor commented that the GO-GIRL Program prepared him to work with adolescents better than any other teacher preparation courses he had taken, including student teaching. For another student, working with the GO-GIRL Program was her first experience teaching before a group of adolescents. She stated:

When I was first told that I would be teaching the math portion of the program, it kept me up the night before. I can honestly say I was terrified of teaching in front of the class. I can finally say I feel the opportunity helped me put a nagging giant to rest. Even though I was not perfect all the time, I think the overall experience was wonderful. This great opportunity helped the mentors enhance their teaching skills. I also think that it gave the girls a different viewpoint than school. Even though they were being taught a curriculum, the fact that we all have different methods, it made the class more interesting.

The Role of the RU Student Mentors

Establishing mentoring relationships among the seventh-grade girls and their assigned mentors was the backbone of the GO-GIRL Program. In teams, four to five girls worked with two mentors to

design and complete a GO-GIRL Program social science research project using “real life” data collected from their peers. With the help of their mentors, the girls:

- designed a survey, posted it on the Internet, and collected data
- analyzed the data
- formulated and tested hypotheses
- presented findings to parents and guests
- chose a research topic (The topics were “Peer Pressure” for spring 2006 and “Body Image” for spring 2007.)

Throughout the GO-GIRL Program, the student mentors reflected on their experiences in various journal entries.

Success of the GO-GIRL Program Experience for the RU Student Mentors

RU’s GO-GIRL Program was a successful learning experience for its student mentors. Some mentors were surprised by how easily the girls opened up to them, sharing personal issues and often asking for advice. Two male mentors participated in the program’s first year (spring 2006). One male had originally expressed feelings of insecurity in his reflective journal, thinking that he and the other male would be treated differently. He was pleasantly surprised to read one student’s journal entry: “John scared me at first. But he is always smiling and willing to help. That is something that I am not used to. But, after a while, I warmed up to him, and he really is a nice guy.”

The mentors also developed relationships with their peer partners as they worked with the girls on their assigned teams. One of their final assignments for the course was to interview their partners. They asked each other questions about their personal thoughts and feelings on mentoring and what they learned from the project. Throughout the GO-GIRL Program, they often collaborated on strategies to deal with the more “challenging” girls in their group. They quickly began to learn each other’s strengths to further support the team effort in mentoring. One mentor commented about her fellow partners:

I feel we all taught each other how to be better teachers. For one, I received knowledge from Tom on how to convey my thoughts better. He was very knowledgeable on every topic and he helped me explore new techniques in my thinking process. Bari taught me how to loosen up with the girls.

Mentoring also opened a window of self-reflection for the mentors themselves. Some entered the program with doubts about their abilities to mentor and work with adolescent girls.

The student mentors who were practicing teachers in the field viewed the mentoring piece of this program worthy of replication in a real school setting. One concluded, “Because of the GO-GIRL Program, I have talked to another colleague at my school and have given serious consideration to starting an informal mentoring program for our sixth- through eighth-grade girls. They have so many issues, and they must need a platform to express themselves.”

Conclusion

The opportunity to practice the role of “teacher as facilitator” and “teacher as mentor” provided RU’s student mentors a real-world, hands-on experience that helped each of them in a certain way, whether or not they had teaching experience. As one mentor commented about her opportunity to conduct lessons:

I think this is a very innovative aspect of what we did at Roosevelt. I think it really makes a difference when the girls see their mentor taking responsibility and presenting information in a competent way. I think it reassures them that their mentor is someone special. I think it also draws on a strength that we have, that the vast majority of mentors were experienced teachers of student teachers.

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