



Challenge and Change:

Challenge Yourself, Change the World



Tips and Strategies for Girl-Led Programming in Rural Communities

Final Research Report

September 2016

Acknowledgments

Girl Scouts of the USA

National President

Kathy Hopinkah Hannan

Interim Chief Executive Officer

Sylvia Acevedo

Chief Operating Officer

Anthony Doyle

Chief Development Officer

Elena Pak

Thanks to generous grants from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), Girl Scouts of the USA (GSUSA) established Challenge and Change: Challenge Yourself, Change the World, a leadership development program in rural communities. Through this funding, Girl Scouts ages 12–17 became change makers as they envisioned and created long-term community Take Action projects. This final funding cycle allowed GSUSA to bring Challenge and Change to Promising Practice to Girl Scout councils in rural communities—we congratulate the girls and volunteers across the country who have been engaged in this work, improving the lives, health, and well-being of their communities.

We acknowledge the following USDA individuals for their contributions to Challenge and Change: Challenge Yourself, Change the World rural youth development grant program—Doug Swanson, national program leader, and Adriene Woodin, branch chief, Awards Management Division.

We also acknowledge the following GSUSA staff members for their contributions: Amy Muslim, research generalist, Girl Scout Research Institute (GSRI); Esther Valentín-Lopez, partnership manager, Office of Philanthropy; and Rafaela Minier, senior endowment and grant lead, Accounting Team.

Special appreciation goes to Dr. Kim Sabo-Flores and Sally Munemitsu, co-founders of Algorhythm, for their work to gather and synthesize learnings across councils in this current funding cycle. Their work allowed GSUSA to highlight the most promising practices developed by councils and to create a “legacy” to promote future girl-led community change projects.

Last, but not least, we would like to thank past and present participating Girl Scout councils for their dedication and commitment to empowering girls to create true community change.



Contents

Introduction.....	4
The USDA-Funded Rural Youth Development Project.....	4
The GSUSA-Supported Challenge and Change: Challenge Yourself, Change The World	6
The Study: Finding What Works.....	8
Findings Cite Emergence of New Strategies.....	9
Troop Level: Empowering Troop Leaders and Girl Leaders	9
Create a Culture of Trust	10
Mutual Accountability	10
Listening and Valuing One Another’s Ideas	11
Sharing Power	12
Setting Aside Informal Time Together.....	13
Practice a Growth Mindset	13
Support Goal Management.....	14
Discover Passion and Purpose	15
Community Level: Importance of the Community	17
Importance of Community Engagement	17
Girl Impact on the Community.....	18
Systems Level: Supporting Girl-Led Work	18
Conclusion	20
References.....	21
Appendix	22

Introduction

The USDA-Funded Rural Youth Development Project

In 2002, the United States Congress established the Rural Youth Development (RYD) program through the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) to assist Girl Scouts, 4-H, and Future Farmers of America (FFA) in expanding and strengthening their work in rural America. Through the RYD program, these organizations increased leadership, citizenship, and life skills in young people and the adults who work with them. They also significantly impacted citizens—and the communities in which they lived—through the action projects that were implemented. Although Girl Scouts, 4-H, and FFA, had different program strategies, they all engaged youth in the development of community projects that:

1. Identified complex, long-term community issues or needs;
2. Planned and implemented community projects to address those needs; and
3. Evaluated the impact of community projects, paying explicit attention to building community capital.

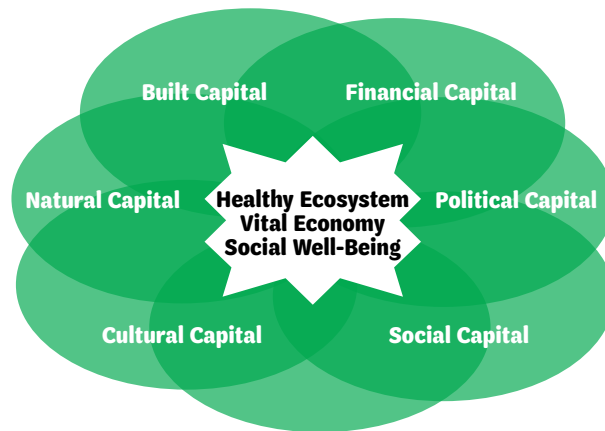
The RYD was built on the understanding that development is a dynamic and interactive process that occurs in the interaction between a person and her or his environment. When youth work in partnership with adults to identify, implement, and evaluate projects that strengthen their environments, they are fostering development—both their own and the community's.



Girl Scouts of Eastern Missouri
Community Amphitheater

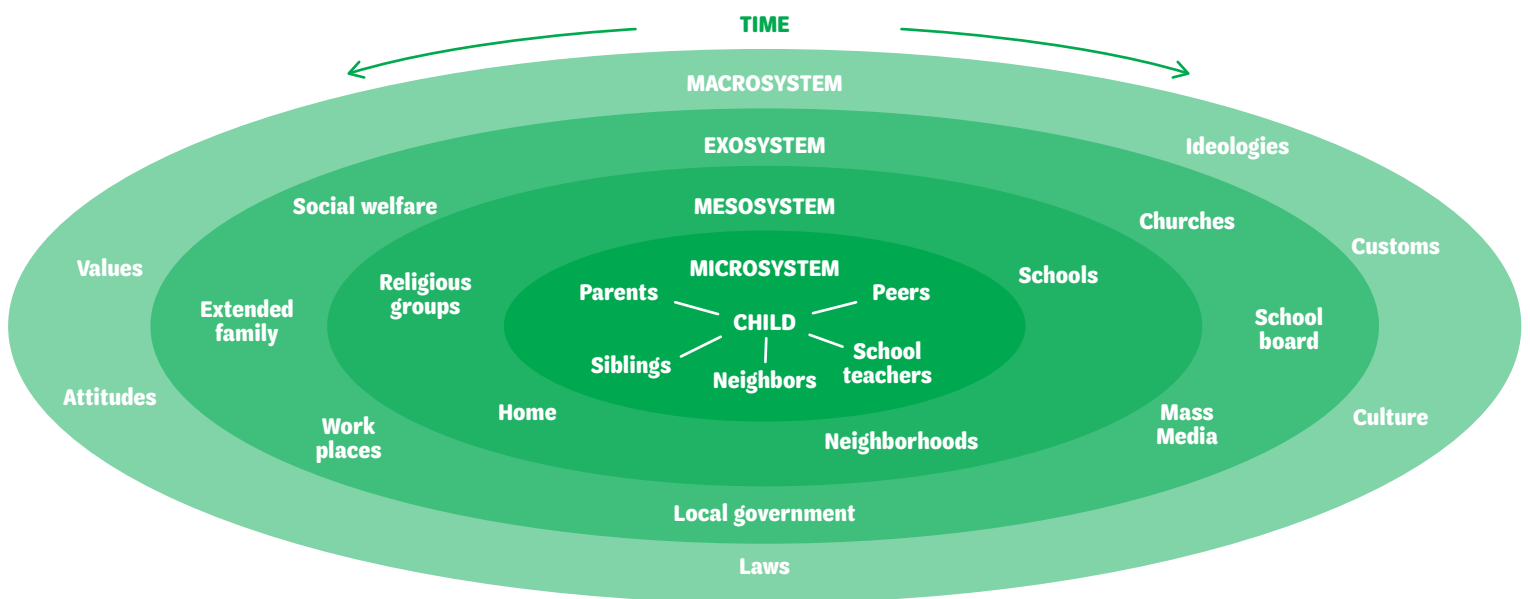
Many psychologists have argued that the activity of transforming “the current state of things” is what makes individual and societal development possible (Holzman 2008; Newman and Holzman 1993). Youth-led RYD projects intentionally engage youth in shaping and reshaping their communities to promote development. As individual youth-led RYD projects strengthen human, social, civic, financial, cultural, natural, and built capital, they collectively produce vibrant communities, strong families, healthy people, and successful youth (Flora 2006, see fig. 1). These seven community capitals have been used by a growing network of community development researchers and practitioners to analyze change in rural areas in the United States and abroad.

Figure 1



In this way, human development is part of a larger ecological system of development (Bronfenbrenner 1979) that includes family and home, school, community, and society (see fig. 2). Each of these ever-changing, dynamic, and multilevel environments, as well as the interactions among these environments, is key to development. Every young person is simultaneously enmeshed in different ecosystems, from the most intimate home ecological system moving outward to the larger school system and to the most expansive system, society and culture. Each of these systems inevitably interacts with and influences each other and every aspect of a child's life.

Figure 2



GSUSA-Supported Challenge and Change: Challenge Yourself, Change the World

Within Girl Scouts of the USA (GSUSA), the RYD project became known as Challenge and Change: Challenge Yourself, Change the World. The intent was to reach new communities where middle and high school girls were not currently being served by Girl Scouts. Over 11 years, the program, took place in 132 communities within 31 states.

During the 2012–2013 reporting period alone, more than 2,000 rural middle and high school girls were engaged in the Challenge and Change program and contributed 45,047 hours for an estimated value of \$968,956. Adult volunteers (428) contributed a total of 13,265 volunteer hours for an estimated value of \$289,044, and Girl Scout council salaried staff provided an in-kind contribution of their time to the grant in the amount of 3,024 hours with an estimated value of \$68,505. Youth and adult volunteer hours resulted in a combined value of \$1.25 million. Councils reported that a total of 9,653 members of their communities benefited from the projects.¹

The U.S. Department of the Treasury authorization for this USDA project is expiring and the final round of funding, which engaged 22 rural communities in nine states, ended in August 2016. In this final phase, projects include developing community gardens, establishing peer homework help, creating dog parks, building a community amphitheater for the arts, developing a library, as well as starting health and nutrition programs, get-moving campaigns, and cooking classes (see the appendix for a full list of councils and projects).

The Challenge and Change program and curriculum drew on extensive research in youth development, leadership, and social entrepreneurship. It also aligned with the Girl Scout Leadership Experience, activities and experiences that encourage girls to discover their personal best, connect with others in an increasingly diverse world, and take action to solve problems and improve their communities. The Challenge and Change curriculum engaged girls in six key areas of training: project preparation, project investigation, planning, action, evaluation, and demonstration.

Through Challenge and Change projects, girls became change makers as they envisioned and implemented long-term projects that strengthened rural communities. These types of projects created a particular “context,” or environment for positive youth development. As adults and older teens worked together to create projects, they developed stronger relationships and connections; learned how to make positive contributions to their communities; began to care about their communities and the people living within them; became more competent as they gained expertise in evaluating, planning, managing, public speaking, and other skills; increased confidence in themselves as leaders in the community; developed character as they interacted with the common attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors valued by their communities; and learned self-regulation skills, such as goal setting and goal management.

Girls were supported through a comprehensive Challenge and Change curriculum posted on the RYD website, which included a youth-led evaluation toolkit, instruction by specially trained Girl Scout program staff and mentoring by community champions. Girls began Challenge and Change with a five-day retreat during which they learned leadership, problem solving, and entrepreneurial skills through a comprehensive multimedia curriculum led by trained facilitators. The 35-hour training inspired girls to learn more about themselves, discover what effective leadership looks like, connect with local experts, and dig into issues affecting their communities. Girls learned skills to identify community problems, recognize and build on local assets, and design sustainable solutions and action plans. After the retreat, girls returned home and recruited a community action team—including an adult who served as their community champion—to turn their good ideas into sustainable, long-term projects. In addition, girls received seed funding to launch their projects.

¹ The volunteer rate is determined by [Independent Sector](#). The student contribution is calculated by multiplying \$21.79 by the total number of hours contributed to the project, intensively or less intensively. *Annual Year-End Output Measures Report (2013–2016)*. USDA Rural Youth Development Grant.



Girls in Action

Lyons, Georgia. Armed with information that Hispanics have diabetes rates much higher than the national average, Girl Scouts decided to improve human and cultural capital in their community by helping diabetic Hispanics learn healthy cooking and eating behaviors while respecting cultural traditions. Girls put several strategies in place, such as planting a community garden, developing a cooking show, launching four home gardens, and teaching cooking lessons about how to prepare traditional foods in healthier ways. They harvested and distributed over 2,000 pounds of vegetables and 170 copies of healthy recipes to diabetics in their community—at no cost.

Florida City and Homestead, Florida. Miami Dade County studies indicated that many children are at risk of school failure. Girl Scouts decided to address this human capital issue by establishing homework assistance, tutoring, and mentoring programs to help elementary school children advance to the next grade, to prevent students from dropping out, and to reduce truancy. They worked with 175 students for two hours, three times a week in an after-school program that was established in 2005 through this RYD grant program.

*Girl Scouts of Greater Iowa
Charles City Dog Park for community members and their pets*

The Study: Finding What Works

This study highlights some of the most promising practices developed by councils as they designed and implemented sustainable girl-led community action projects and is meant to create a “legacy” for the Challenge and Change work that promotes future girl-led community-change projects.

As USDA funding came to a close, GSUSA supported research to explore the contextual variables surrounding a successful, sustainable, girl-led project. Through an appreciative inquiry conducted in spring 2016, the research team (Algorhythm, led by Dr. Kim Sabo-Flores) reviewed all archival documentation—including a meta-analysis of three Challenge and Change evaluations, council reports, and USDA reports (from 2005 to 2015)—and conducted interviews with girls and staff from eight of the nine currently funded councils. In total, 27 interviews were conducted with: six girls, ten council leaders, nine troop leaders, and two experts who focus on youth-led programming.

Troops were selected to participate in this study because they had developed projects that were “sustainable.” In other words, there were strategies in place for the community and/or school to continue the project beyond engagement with the original girls. These nine troops developed project linkages with other community partners (schools, parks departments, city councils, and similar entities) to ensure their projects would continue beyond the USDA funding. They were also selected by their council representatives because they did exceptional work engaging girls and community members, and embodied the values of girl-led programming. Because the focus of this study was lifting up promising practices to share with other troops, these troops were fertile ground for exploration.



*Girl Scouts of Historic Georgia
Green Teen Project*

Findings Cite Emergence of New Strategies

Findings from this study illustrate how the Challenge and Change initiative not only developed girls, but also ignited “new creative strategies” and solutions that prompted change across the organization—from the girls, troop leaders, and council staff to the systems and frameworks surrounding the work (e.g., funding, policies, cultures, values) to truly allow for ground-up, girl-led decision making. As these systems grew, troop leaders and girl leaders faced some challenges, which they related to as opportunities for learning—they persisted and made changes along the way, embodying the Challenge and Change: Challenge Yourself, Change the World motto. As one council representative noted,

“I have watched this grant evolve over the years. It gets more Girl Scouts involved in rural communities. I have found that it is the most satisfying thing I have ever done in my life. I get to be a part of it. You can really see the impact of what Girl Scouts can mean to a young person and to the community. We are allowing girls to become powerful, smart women who make a difference.”

This report highlights the strategies developed at troop, community, and systems levels to promote girl-led sustained community projects. The report, divided into three sections, includes tips and strategies for troop leaders, council leaders, and thought leaders.

Troop Level: Empowering Troop Leaders and Girl Leaders

Social cultural psychologists have shown that development is a participatory and relational activity that occurs when children and youth creatively imitate others who are more advanced (Vygotsky 1978, 102). However, there are few environments in which youth feel safe to perform or engage in activities that allow them to break out of their socially-fixed identities (Heath 2000). Young people, particularly girls, live their lives in environments that insist they “behave” and perform the roles allotted them.

Girl-led RYD projects created an exceptional opportunity for girls to develop, allowing them to stretch beyond their societal identities as “students” or “children” into new roles as leaders and contributors to their communities. Highly successful troops accomplished this by embodying four core positive youth development practices:

1. Creating a culture of trust through:
 - ◆ Mutual accountability
 - ◆ Listening and valuing one another’s ideas
 - ◆ Sharing power
 - ◆ Setting aside informal time together
2. Practicing a growth mindset
3. Helping girls manage their goals
4. Supporting girls to tap into their own interests and passions

Create a Culture of Trust

Girls in this program were often new to Girl Scouting and had very little previous experience truly partnering with adults and peers. Therefore, it was necessary to encourage new types of relationships based on equity, trust, and mutual accountability. The initial retreat allowed time and space for troop leaders to begin cultivating these new relationships and helped them set the tone for the work. As one council representative noted,

“They did not know each other before this. They came together and they really formed a close bond and trust with one another. They went on the retreat where they connected better as a team. They also did things to build team outside of the project.”

Nonetheless, the trusting relationships developed at the retreat needed to be continually cultivated and nurtured by both youth and adults throughout project. Activities in the Challenge and Change curriculum implicitly promoted girl and adult partnership. However, troop leaders had no formal guidelines for accomplishing this. Troop leaders and girls provided several tips about how to build trust within the group. These included: creating mutual accountability, developing strategies to really listen and value one another’s ideas, sharing power, and setting aside informal time to just hang out.

Mutual Accountability. In order to create mutual accountability within troops, girls created ground rules and held one another accountable; troop leaders modeled their own accountability and responsibility to the girls.

“We are always there for each other. We have our own pact like family members.”
— girl leader

- ◆ **Developing ground rules.** Girls were engaged, from day one, in discussions about how they would work together. During the initial retreat, troop leaders encouraged girls to develop ground rules that outlined how they wanted to treat one another, how they would respond to one another’s ideas. These “rules” and values remained very much alive throughout the projects, with girls creating new rules and revising old rules as needed.
- ◆ **Girls holding one another accountable.** While creating ground rules was very important, it was also necessary for the girls to hold one another accountable for abiding by them, which they did. It is also important to note that troop leaders were not the accountability police—girl leaders did not need to be reminded of their responsibilities because they had a sense of accountability to their peers and to the community. Troop leaders and girl leaders shared the sense of the importance of mutual accountability, for themselves, toward one another, and, most of all, for the community.

“I wanted to go out there every day to check up on it [the garden] . . .

We give them [the plants] water and grew them, then picked them and washed them, and then we gave them to the community. We didn’t quit. Knowing that we had a reason—not because [name of troop leaders] wanted us to, not for just ourselves, but to help others. Helping others put a big smile on our faces, and then we knew we were doing a great job. Why would we ever stop?”

—girl leader

- ◆ **Troop leaders modeling accountability.** Several troop leaders modeled their own accountability to the girls by letting them know that they would not “give up on them” or their goals. Instead of demanding that the girls act “responsible,” troop leaders modeled their own commitment to the girls, making statements such as, “you girls wanted to do the project, so I will be there until the end, no matter what it takes.”

“We want to see it though, we promised them to see this through. This helped the girls in their perseverance and commitment. Letting them know that they are valued.”

—troop leader

Listening and Valuing One Another’s Ideas. In order to develop project ideas, the girls and troop leaders needed to really listen to one another and value each other’s ideas. Troop leaders held the value that there are “no wrong answers” and encouraged girls to ask questions frequently and learn more about one another’s perspectives; they provided space for individual thinking and reflection; and, they supported girls in their choice of a single idea while valuing the input and expertise of the group.

- ◆ **No wrong answers.** Troop leaders set the stage by letting girls know there are “no wrong answers” and “all ideas are good ideas.” They also responded to girls’ ideas by taking a stance of inquiry, asking questions and probing deeper about the girls’ thoughts, feelings, and life experiences. Through group activities and informal interactions, they supported girls’ really listening to one another without judgment and learning about each others’ life experiences.
- ◆ **Space for individual thinking and reflection.** In the first chapter of the Challenge and Change curriculum guide, “It Starts With Me,” girls discover their individual skills and strengths. They made a personal compass—better defining who they are and what they see as their goals. While they worked with other girls during this discovery process, most of the focus was on their own personal journey of discovery. Prior to brainstorming with the entire group, troop leaders allowed the girls individual time to think and to reflect on their own opinions.
- ◆ **Selecting one project, valuing all girls.** “Cause for Concern,” chapter four in the Challenge and Change curriculum guide, helped girls move the focus from the individual to the community as they worked to investigate important questions about their community. This was a critical moment in the development of the project because, when done well, it helped girls identify their own strengths and interests within the selected community project; however, if done poorly, girls were likely to feel badly that their project ideas did not get selected. This part of the curriculum helped broaden girls’ concepts and understanding of community issues by encouraging them to identify the root causes and all factors influencing the issues. This step can often help sway girls to shift their own personal ideas and concepts in favor of a solution for the entire community.



In many cases, the idea for a project wasn't always unanimous. Therefore, girls were invited to "build a case for their specific project" by developing thoughtful arguments about how their project ideas might address the community challenge in a realistic and concrete way. These cases were then presented to the group of girls for their consideration. If the troop still could not agree, they were asked to "sleep on it" and come back to engage in further discussion. These decision-making processes were taken very seriously and girls were given the time and opportunity to determine which project made the most sense given the community need and their available resources.

Sharing Power. Troop leaders encouraged equity and were able to share power with girls, moving beyond socially determined roles in order to become equal partners in the process of creating community change. Adult troop leaders did not "speak down" to girls, but acted on the belief that girls were capable of almost anything. They saw girls as "community assets" and leaders with strengths and abilities that would build stronger communities.

"The girls have been in control. They are able to dictate and have an adult listen to them. The troop leader is amazing and values their opinions, and means it! And they know it. They are completely inspired. They feel really important. They are the ones doing it."

—council leader

"She [the council representative] speaks to us like we are equal on the same level. She doesn't talk down to us. We are on the same social level."

—girl leader

Troop leaders related to the girls more as who they were becoming than who they were at the time of the projects. They assigned girls roles and responsibilities that continued to stretch their capacities. In several cases, troop leaders felt the girls were able to run the projects, and even the troops, with very little support from them.

One troop leader said,

“If something happens tomorrow, one of the girls will take over. They would take on the troops. I am grooming some of those older girls to be troop leaders. I call them assistant troop leaders, but they are already leaders.”

Setting Aside Informal Time Together. Prior to the Challenge and Change project, most girls did not know each other. Therefore, the informal times together, just laughing and joking, became incredibly valuable for their work and their growth. Troops took time to go on trips, go walking, have their nails done, have meals together, and just hang out. It turns out that this time together created a strong foundation from which to build the projects—it supported girls’ learning from and about one another, strengthened bonds with the adults, increased social skills, and built long-lasting, sustained social capital.

“There were times when they just wanted to chat with each other and talk about their day at school. I allowed them to take the lead, and we also did girl things like retail-therapy days. They loved it. They sat somewhere and talked without anyone telling them ‘don’t be saying that.’ They never used foul language and they had wonderful conversations.”

—troop leader

“We did a lot of adventures, we hung out, and we did a lot. When we were all together, that was my favorite part. Now sometimes the older girls come back and I love that. When I go to college, I am going to come back too.”

—girl leader

Practice a Growth Mindset. Troops leaders and girls continually practiced a “growth mindset,” taking risks, stretching beyond their own perceived capacities, and embracing failure. Introduced by Carol Dweck in 2006, growth mindset is a theory that when youth are given challenging work and taught that mistakes are fun, they’ll take more risks, persist in moving toward their goals, and realize their life potential. “Meeting Challenges,” chapter nine of the *Challenge and Change* curriculum, provided valuable tips and strategies on how to promote risk-taking and navigate challenges.

This study found that successful troops really understood and embraced failure as a key part of learning and success. Troop leaders not only let girls fail, but they encouraged it, counting on girls to find new solutions and strategies.

“It is not always going to be what you thought it was going to be... it may be better!”

—troop leader

“When it looked like we were going to fail, we just failed. That is life. There are things that we didn’t do and that haven’t been as successful and that is OK—you have to fail too. Everything in life isn’t that easy, some things work and some things don’t. If it doesn’t work, then you replan and sometimes it may work better. Life isn’t always rosy.”

—troop leader

Troop leaders also needed to get comfortable with risk-taking and potential failure. In many cases, successful troop leaders reported that they were initially wary of the projects the girls wanted to create, mostly because they themselves were uncomfortable or inexperienced with the topic or direction. The troop leader's ability to stay open and learn alongside girls was paramount. They also needed to get comfortable with the idea that they too might "fail." The adults, who did not always know where the girls were leading, needed to really partner with them to create something new—something that never before existed in many of their lives.

"Gardening would not have been my first choice—I kill plastic plants and cactus. We did not do something that I am interested in or good at. You have to have something they will buy into whether or not you're interested. As much as I say that Girl Scouts has been a good experience for the girls—it has been for me as well. I did a lot of things that I would not have done otherwise."

—troop leader

Support Goal Management

Researchers who have studied the value of goal management to promote youth development discovered that this skill promotes both positive youth development and thriving outcomes for youth (Gestsdottir et al. 2009). The components of goal management include: selection of goals, optimization of goals (the ability to identify and obtain the resources needed to reach your goal and compensation), a recognition that not every goal may be achievable, and resilience when failing to meet a goal (Heck, Subramaniam, Carlos 2010).

"Planning Success," chapter seven of the *Challenge and Change* curriculum guide, supported girls as they focused on long-term visions for their projects and set solid, actionable plans for realizing them by developing mini-goals along the way. These shorter "wins" were instrumental in helping girls see their progress and persist along the path toward achieving their end goals. Here's how one troop leader presented the issue,

"I would say to the girls: 'How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time.' We aren't building an amphitheater today; we are selling cinnamon buns."

The entire Challenge and Change process significantly helped girls create realistic plans, and supported them to better understand how to appropriately set goals, pursue various strategies to achieve them, and shift gears when the going got tough.

"We had mini-goals we could check off, and feel successful. They could see short-term goals to get to longer-term goals. Let them have these grandiose ideas and then help them get real. They are creative and they have these amazing ideas. They have this passion. Let them start with an idea and then bring it back to realistic time and budget. If plan A won't work, then what is plan B?"

—troop leader

Discover Passion and Purpose

One of the most unique features of this work was the girls' discovery of their own sense of passion and purpose. Troop leaders encouraged girls to discover their "sparks" and tap into their sense of purpose and contribution to the community. In this way, it can be said that these girls were on a pathway of thriving. The definition and preliminary measurement of thriving in adolescence. Benson and Scales (2009, 90) noted that thriving young people "make full use of their special gifts in ways that benefit themselves and others." Thriving youth are discovering their unique talents and interests and finding a way to express those. Benson and Scales identify two significant components to thriving, both of which can be seen in successful Challenge and Change projects: 1) a sense of energy and specialness that is supported by the environment of the young person and 2) a balanced movement or direction toward an intended outcome, what Damon calls "purpose" (Damon 2008).

Here's what one girl said,

"It opened my eyes to realize I shouldn't take things for granted. Something so small as bringing someone veggies is a big deal! It makes the way I see things a lot different. It made me want to help people. It makes me want to help people for the rest of my life. We have all changed for the better. We are the heart and community."

From "It Starts with Me," the first chapter of the *Challenge and Change* curriculum guide, girls were asked to begin the discovery process of identifying their "sparks," to reflect on their unique strengths and passions. Throughout the work, troop leaders balanced community need with each girl's "spark" exploration process.

It turns out that all the girls interviewed previously had or developed a spark for "giving back" and contributing to their community. Successful troops tapped into each girl's deep sense of purpose and desire to contribute to the community.

"There were issues that I didn't know about before. There were problems that I found solutions to that I didn't know existed—like how to grow things organically and not use pesticides. I learned a lot about what goes into your food at the store. I didn't really know what was happening with weed killers that may not be so great to eat. Now my dream job would be a cosmetics chemist. Plants play a big role in that. Using them for health and for hair and stuff. One of the colleges I am looking at has a garden that is student led. I think that is cool and I would like to be a part of that."

—girl leader

"It is fun; it feels good to help the community and help people. It is not feeling like work when you are doing it. You really need to find something that the community needs. You need to see that what you are doing makes a difference in people's lives, otherwise you have lost the purpose of it. If you are doing it and no one cares, you have lost the meaning. It's about finding something you are doing that will improve the lives of others."

—girl leader

This sense of purpose was the very fuel that motivated girls to stay engaged with the project and focus on its long-term sustainability. Girls also used their passion and energy to bring other girls into the troop, recruiting them to help sustain the project and create a legacy for their work.

"I let them know [the new girls] you are going to plant seed, and we are going to pass veggies out to the community. This is the best feeling ever. What we are doing is good. We aren't doing it because [name of troop leader] is making us—we are doing it for a reason."

—girl leader

Another unique characteristic of this work was the way in which it tapped into troop leaders' passions. One could argue that this work truly helped adults find their own "sparks."

"I'm a very passionate person; I put my whole heart and soul in it. I am a dedicated person, and I think my girls can sense that—they can sense the excitement and energy. They see the passion I have for them. If they have anyone they can talk to, they can talk to me. I do make time to talk to them whenever."

—troop leader

This passion fueled a willingness to go above and beyond to support the girls. These troop leaders showed up on weekends, in the evenings, and during school hours, and they modeled a growth mindset (taking risks, persisting, challenging themselves, and shifting gears when the going got tough). All the while, they kept an amazingly positive attitude. They were more than mentors, they were friends, mothers, and role models to the girls.

"Basically we all see [troop leader name] as another mom. She is really nurturing. She calls us to see how we are doing, how school is going. Whenever we have schoolwork, she opens her office to us so that we can use the Internet. I love her. If we need anything, any girl, any time."

—girl leader

"I have sat around this table with these girls. If they had a question they could not deal with, they would call me and say 'what you do think?' They see me as a friend, someone they can call when they have a problem. Someone to talk to. I help them look for funding for college scholarships. I love to see their success, them growing up and them being those young ladies that I want them to be. I go to everyone's graduation, and I stand in the bleachers and I root for them and they can hear."

—troop leader



*Girl Scouts of Historic Georgia
Volunteers cultivating a half acre of community vegetable garden*

Community Level: Importance of the Community

Community-level change was a key variable on the road toward success for both youth and communities. Community engagement was important for the girls, because community members came to see youth as leaders and assets within the community, thereby changing the narrative about what girls can do—and what girls did was a lot. They made significant changes in their community and paved the path for ongoing community and youth engagement.

Importance of Community Engagement

Troops that successfully engaged a wide variety of community members were able to garner more resources for their projects and had more opportunities for youth leadership within the community. When community members saw what girls were doing, they got involved, made donations or contributions to help girls meet their goals, and made sure that the projects were highlighted within the communities. In two instances, anonymous donations were the fuel that girls needed to stay engaged and complete their projects.

“It is amazing when it comes to the support we have had. Girl Scouts cannot pay for these things to happen. It becomes a community event. It is sponsored by the community.”

—troop leader

“They were invited to be part of more things as the community learned about it. The community board set up a health fair and the girls were invited because they were a presence in the community and people wanted to see them more. Community buy-in is key.”

—troop leader

More than fiscal support, the girls were most grateful for the shift in how adults within the community saw and related to youth. In their new roles, these girls were seen as leaders and community builders.

“Older people think we are sitting in our bedrooms playing video games and then they see us and think ‘wow, a teenager outside, what is happening?’ It is interesting that people see me outside doing physical work and I think that is really cool. Young people are out doing things.”

—girl leader

“In the Hispanic community the girls wanted their own community to be better and healthier . . . the by-product is that the principal and teachers are seeing former troublemakers in a different light, for their potential rather than their past history.”

—troop leader

Girl Impact on the Community

Girls made amazing impacts on their community and were able to measure their change using the youth-led evaluation toolkit. Each troop engaged youth in assessing their change within the community over time. What they found was remarkable:

- ◆ One troop focused on homework help and worked three times per year with 175 students for two hours. They provided age-appropriate books for young readers and encouraged them to read for fun. In 2013, they learned that 94 percent of the students in their literacy program demonstrated improvement in oral reading fluency.
- ◆ In another community, girls learned that there was a lack of acceptance in their school and community for young people with special needs. Therefore, they created a school-based project in which students worked with special needs students who had profound disabilities in order to help them become more socially integrated into their school and community. Their project helped to shift the entire school culture, with 141 students increasing their knowledge of how to work compassionately with the special needs population and with 12 special needs students improving some motor/cognitive skills, feeling more accepted in school and in the community, and developing social skills.
- ◆ Another troop created a community garden and harvested and distributed over 2,000 pounds of vegetables and 170 copies of healthy recipes to diabetics, at no cost. Working in partnership with a local hospital, they discovered that 60 percent of the diabetics in their community have shown improvement in A1C blood glucose levels since their project began. They also learned that community members were substituting oil for lard, grilling instead of frying, and serving vegetables at least four times a week.
- ◆ Another troop believed that all citizens regardless of age or ability could lead physically active lives. They encouraged their community to collectively move 1 million human-powered miles by walking, biking, jogging, swimming, dancing, and doing other activities, and they gave out pedometers to help community members track their progress and share it online.

Troops also developed sustained “built capital” within their communities, creating amphitheaters, walking/exercise paths, dog parks, community gardens, and libraries within schools that will live on well beyond the Girl Scout experiences.

Systems Level: Supporting Girl-Led Work

Girl-led programming is meant to be empowering. Indeed, it is structured to help girls critically question a host of power dynamics. A girl's ability to navigate these dynamics and successfully garner resources and support for her work can be exceedingly empowering. Conversely, a girl's inability to navigate these dynamics can cause negative effects, emphasizing her lack of power and inability to make change.

Council representatives' and troop leaders' support of girls to successfully navigate the real-life circumstances that accompany receipt of federal funding was incredibly important. For example, when it came to budget restrictions and allocations, the troop leaders who leveraged the opportunity to help girls understand the realities of “budgeting” and creating realistic projects within given guidelines were incredibly successful. They saw these conversations as an integral part of the Challenge and Change experiences, helping girls meet the challenges and create new innovative solutions.

“It happened a couple of times, we had a great idea but then it was like, ‘Sorry we can’t do it.’ I would say: ‘Girls, I have some good news and bad news. The bad news? We can’t paint the walls. The good news is that we are able to get the book shelves.’ On the positive side, we are able to continue on with the main [purpose and mission of the project]. It was a part of the whole process . . . this is the kind of thing that life is made of. In life, things don’t always work the way we want. In my mind, they are gaining valuable life experience here. That is all part of it.”

—troop leader

The USDA was a thoughtful learning partner, developing its reporting requirements with feedback from councils. The most successful councils negotiated and pushed back, with both GSUSA and USDA, to help their girls succeed in their visions. They became empowered to both ask for changes, when necessary, and work around some of the most intractable requirements and rules regarding budget allocations and reporting. In doing so, they created an opportunity for learning and change at the systems level.



Conclusion

The greatest lesson drawn from this study is that in order to truly create empowering girl-led experiences, the entire ecosystem—composed of girls, community, troops, councils, GSUSA, and USDA—needs to develop. By its very nature, girl-led work calls for a paradigm shift in the way we work with girls driving the agenda from the ground up.

Data from this study suggests a thoughtful analysis of the systems and structures that support girl-led work, assuring that they provide space and energy for girls' input throughout an initiative. Careful attention needs to be paid to empowering, not only girls, but also troop leaders and council staff and, to the extent possible, the frameworks surrounding the work (e.g., funding, policies, cultures, values) to truly allow for ground-up, girl-led decision making.

The Challenge and Change initiative helped create new strategies and solutions that prompted change to better support girl-led programming across the entire Girl Scout organization. Troop leaders and girl leaders faced some challenges as they pushed back and navigated the realities of a world in which girls have little voice. However, they related to these challenges as opportunities for learning, they persisted, and they were able to make changes along the way. They embodied the Challenge and Change values and left the project better equipped to both challenge themselves and change the world.



References

- Benson, P.L. and P.C. Scales. 2009. The definition and preliminary measurement of thriving in adolescence. *Journal of Positive Psychology* 4: 85–104.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. 1979. *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Damon, William. 2008. *The path to purpose*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Dweck, C. 2006. *Mindset: The new psychology of success*. New York: Ballantine Books.
- Flora, J.L., C.B. Flora, F. Campana, M. Garcia Bravo, and E. Fernandez-Baca. 2006. Social capital and advocacy coalitions: Examples of environmental issues from Ecuador. In *Development with identity: community, culture and sustainability in the Andes*, ed. R.E. Rhoades. 287–297. Cambridge, MA: CABI Publishing.
- Gestsdottir, S., S. Lewin-Bizan, A. von Eye, J.V. Lerner, and R.M. Lerner. 2009. The structure and function of selection, optimization, and compensation in middle adolescence: Theoretical and applied implications. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology* 30: 585–600.
- Heath, S. B. 2000. Making learning work. *Afterschool Matters*, 1(1): 33–45.
- Heck, K., A. Subramaniam, and R. Carlos. 2010. The step-it-up-2-thrive theory of change. *Monograph University of California*. Davis, CA: 4-H Center for Youth Development.
- Holzman, L. 2008. *Vygotsky at work and play*. New York: Routledge.
- Holzman, L. 1997. *Schools for growth: Radical alternative to current educational models*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates; New York: Routledge.
- Newman, F. and L. Holzman. 1993. *Lev Vygotsky: Revolutionary scientist*. New York: Routledge.
- Vygotsky, L. 1978. *Mind in society*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Appendix

1. Girl Scouts of Eastern Missouri

- ◆ Community amphitheater in Evergreen Park promotes and fosters community art events through a newly created arts council.
- ◆ The Better Together community program is a garden and sports program designed to help young children learn the advantages of healthy life-choices.

2. Girl Scouts of Greater Iowa

- ◆ In the off-leash dog park, community members can exercise themselves and their pets in a holistic approach at newly created river walk stations.

3. Girl Scouts of Historic Georgia

- ◆ The Green Teens project works to reduce the incidence of diagnosed diabetes in the Hispanic community.
- ◆ Health Occupations Students Associations (HOSA) pairs future health care professionals with special needs students who have profound disabilities in order to support their social integration into the school and community by adapting activities.

4. Girl Scouts of Western Ohio

- ◆ Ada Puzzle and Fitness Path is a hardscape fitness path supporting outdoor healthy lifestyle activities for youth.
- ◆ Napoleon Dog Park is a place for families to go to in order to promote physical fitness and improve the mental state of pet owners.

5. Girl Scouts Western Pennsylvania

- ◆ Sprouts for Strength project helps elementary-age youth discover good nutritional habits, connect with the community and each other by planting vegetable gardens, and learn how to cook and preserve their harvest.
- ◆ The Greenhouse project provides agricultural space on school property, reducing food waste through the use of composters to provide compost for use inside the greenhouse.
- ◆ The Front Porch Planter project features vegetable planter-box gardens designed to get community members actively involved in gardening and harvesting their own homegrown fresh produce.
- ◆ The Growing Green program provides gardening education and hands-on projects for community members, with a focus on children.

6. Girl Scout Council of Tropical Florida

- ◆ Read for Fun is an after-school literacy program that helps children pass to the next grade level, working to prevent school truancy and aiming to stop students from becoming dropouts.

7. Girl Scouts of Southern Illinois

- ◆ The hydroponic community garden promotes health and wellness activities to the local community.
- ◆ Illinois Heritage Garden, a native-species garden for community members interested in gardening, offers access to science, math, and language arts lesson plans.

8. Girl Scouts of Virginia Skyline

- ◆ 1Million2Gether project focuses on getting community members moving by incorporating exercise into their daily lifestyles.
- ◆ The Youthtastic project creates community opportunities to engage youth and community partners.