Information Sheet 4

Gifted Rural Adolescent Girls and Popular Culture.

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All girls are influenced by popular culture. While engaging with the various modes of popular culture available girls learn how to be (Harris, 2004), displayed through images, lyrics or written articles that describe how to dress, how to relate to others and how to behave in work settings. They learn about fashion, lifestyle, relationships and careers (Fabrianesi, Jones, & Reid, 2008; Wohlwend, 2009). Popular culture has been described as an influence on adolescent girls' confidence and esteem (Charles, 2010; Cheu, 2007; Kearney, 2006; Pipher, 2004). However, its impact on the aspirations of gifted adolescent girls in rural settings has not been presented in the literature.

Gifted adolescent girls in an Australian rural setting described popular culture as a source of information and resources that both supported and disrupted their sense of aspiration, and their view of themselves as gifted individuals. While popular culture was not the only influence in their lives, they identified that it influenced their decisions about academic talent and their understanding of what it meant to be talented. For these girls, popular culture did not encourage academic achievement or provide positive role models in terms of leadership and achievement even as it opened a world of diversity in its presentation of careers, and life styles. The girls, aged between 12 years old and 16 years old were participants in a research study that explored the impact of popular culture as either a disruptive or supportive force on talent development.

The research study used embedded case study, feminist, methodology to explore the responses of 31 adolescent girls from two regional schools in a regional setting in NSW. The girls were in either year 7 or Year 10, years selected because of the point in time in adolescence: either entry into secondary school or mid-secondary school as the girls moved into the senior school years. They were identified as academically gifted based on their placement in the top quartile of the literacy and numeracy NAPLAN testing in year 5 and Year 9, their results from in-school assessments and anecdotal identification from teachers and school staff. All participants attended a series of focus group meetings, where the discussion was guided through semi structured questions by the researcher. They also completed a personal journal, reflecting on their engagement with popular culture and writing about their thoughts and feelings overall. The journals provided deep insight into their personal connections with popular culture, while the focus groups highlighted their ideas and experiences, individually and collectively.

Models of talent development informed the research. Gagne's Developmental Model of Giftedness and Talent (2008) formed the theoretical framework for the study, providing an established process for talent development that included both environmental and intrapersonal catalysts that impact on the developmental process. Within this framework other key models of talent development that focussed on female talent development offered different insights into the experience of girls and women. Earlier female talent development models (Arnold, Noble, & Subotnik, 1996; Kerr & Larson, 2007; Reis, 1998) retrospectively gathered data from successful talented women to discern the influences and experiences that supported talent development. Collectively, the models identified family, relationships, mentors and school experiences as external sources of information and aspiration. The impact of intrapersonal factors including drive, motivation, esteem, confidence and sense of purpose was also indicated as being important in supporting talent development. None of the existing models included popular culture as a consideration for talent development.

However, this research found that popular culture to be both a support and a disruption to talent development for gifted rural adolescent girls. While it cannot be ignored as a key influence in their lives, the study concluded that girls need critical literacy skills to interpret and recognise when the messaging in popular culture is problematic for talent development and opportunities to interact with diverse role models, and information about possible areas of endeavour for women that counter the images presented in popular culture. Finally, they need support in understanding that successful talent development is not necessarily about fame and success in the public domain but rather about successfully achieving goals and making a difference in one's own sphere of influence.

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