Teachers' Perceptions of "smart" girls: What does it mean for developing girls and young women into leaders?
by Jacqueline E. Jacobs, Ph.D.

Abstract

Based on two studies, one of girls and young women in middle schools and high schools (n=802) and a random sample of their teachers (n=41), there is evidence that girls and young women are confident in their views of themselves as "smart" and do not see any differences in how they are treated by their peers or teachers for being "smart". The evidence from the teachers supports these perceptions and provides a glimpse at what characteristics/behaviors teachers perceive as identifying girls and young women as "smart." This evidence suggests that there is confidence among girls and young women relative to being "smart" which may well provide a basis for the development of skills which are needed to ensure girls and young women become leaders in our society.

Teachers' Perceptions of "Smart" Girls: What Does It mean for Developing Girls and Young Women into Leaders?

In the most highly touted, free, democratic society, where over 51% of the population is female, but only 14 of the 100 U.S. senators and 59 of the 435 members of the House of Representatives are women, it is evident that there is much work to be done to address how we prepare girls and young women to pursue active roles in leadership.

As educational leaders concerned with advancing women in leadership, it is important for us to assess the K-12 environment in which girls and young women are educated to determine what steps might be necessary to ensure that we are developing those skills and abilities that will allow young women to become the leaders so needed in our society.

"Education is an investment that stays with a woman throughout her life, is hers to use as she wishes, and cannot be taken away" (The Population Council, 2002, para 1). The report of The Population Council goes on to provide information indicating that educated women are more likely to be involved in political issues, know their rights, and have a longer life expectancy. Additionally, this report indicated increased economic productivity and more effective investments in the next generation for educated women.

Is Being "Smart" Important in Leadership for a Diverse Society?

If more girls and young women are to become leaders for our society, it appears critical that they have the opportunity in their formative years, particularly through their educational environments, to develop their intellect, abilities, and skills to be leaders as adults. Confidence in one's ability to lead may be as important as the knowledge and skills to do so.

"…Many feel that a deep vein of prejudice still runs through corporate America, despite the upbeat talk about workforce diversity" (Hopkins & Hopkins, 1998, para. 13). In an increasingly diverse society, leadership must be more reflective of the population it serves. "All leaders have the capacity to create a compelling vision, one that takes people to a new place and the ability to translate that vision into reality" (Bennis, 1990, p. 46). Manasse (1986) suggested that visionary leadership includes four types of vision: organization, future, personal, and strategic, with personal vision including the leader's personal aspirations for the organization which acts as the impetus for the leader's actions. Lucas (2002) reported a personal interview with Donna E. Shalala, President of the University of Miami and former U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services, in which she asked: "What kind of higher education leadership is needed in this time of national crisis?" (para. 47). Dr. Shalala responded:

> First of all, fundamental to all of this on whether we're going to have the rule of law has to do with overcoming ignorance. Ignorance about other cultures, ignorance about the challenges that other religions present to us and trying to understand different traditions, ignorance about terrorism itself. All of our knowledge is not going to come out of the CIA, it's going to come from college campuses with people who are ***really smart*** [emphasis added]. And we've got to be ready for all of that. Our students want to talk about it. They want to talk about what the world and the future is going to be like, and what the threats are going to be to our country. (Lucas, 2002, para. 48)

Elements of leadership, grounded in personal vision and knowledge from people who are smart, suggest that to ensure that we have more women pursuing leadership positions in government, business, and education we need to examine the schooling of girls and young women and their perceptions of self. With an understanding of how girls and young women perceive themselves and how their teachers indicate they view girls and the concept of "smart", there is an opportunity to consider what needs to occur in our educational processes to ensure that more young women are prepared to be leaders and are confident in their abilities to lead. Clearly, among our current female leaders, such as President Shalala (University of Miami), there is a belief that we need "smart" people leading our country,

What Do We Know About the Schooling of Girls?

In order to determine some of the issues related to the education of girls and young women in public education in the United States, an examination of the literature on girls in schools indicates that Kramer (1985) found that many girls use social interaction to determine the quality and acceptability of their academic achievement. Kerr (1995), Silverman, (1994/95), as well as, Reis and Callahan (1996) have suggested that the conflicting demands of academic success and social acceptance are a bigger challenge for girls who are gifted than their peers in regular education classes. Girls who have demonstrated high achievement in elementary school display less achievement in middle school and high school, with girls valuing high achievement among same ethnicity girls more than in girls from other ethnic groups (Taylor, Graham, & Hudley, 1997.) There is no evidence that students identify a specific teacher when considering whether they are smart or not. Kamm (1999) addressing issues related to accountability suggested that; "One influence that the government cannot control in an educational setting is the attitude brought into school by the student" (para 8), going on to state, "The attitudes of the household can influence the classroom experience in positive and negative ways" (para 8) she suggested that the school environment for

students is "…fabricated by the attitudes brought into school by some students, the textbooks used in the curriculum, and the teachers in the classroom" (para 7). These attitudes can affect self-perceptions, perceptions of others, and contribute to behaviors exhibited in the classroom.

Walker (1993) suggested that male students call out answers eight times more often than female students, and males are called on more than females. And, when extended to teacher behaviors, Sadker and Sadker (1994) reported that boys were much more likely to be encouraged to solve a problem while girls were given an explanation. Orenstein (1994) reported information that some girls perceive that boys prefer it when they act helpless and "girly". And, there is evidence that girls still face an enormous gender gap in testing (Sadker, 1996). All of these issues are tied to how girls and young women perceive themselves and each other in the educational arena. What happens in the social milieu of middle schools and high schools may well be one of the most significant aspects in shaping the perceptions that girls and young women have about who they are and what they can accomplish, both of which are critical to their development as leaders.

Looking at Perceptions of Girls and Young Women About Being "Smart"

Based on concern about how "smart" girls are viewed and accepted, and aware of Shalala's view of the importance of smart people to provide leadership to address the problems in our current world situation, the initial step in looking at characteristics/beliefs that might lead to girls and young women developing skills and behaviors of leadership was to determine what middle and high school girls and young women perceive about being "smart". A survey of over 800 middle school and high school girls was conducted in a southeastern U.S. state. No specific definition of "smart" was given as the researcher was more interested in the perceptions of girls and young women about themselves and others, however they chose to define "smart". It was assumed that giving a specific definition of "smart" (e.g. good grades, high I.Q.) would limit the range of possible views of what being "smart" is. The survey consisted of seven items which the girls and young women were to rate using a four point scale (see figure 1).

Rate each of the following as a:
1 = This statement is true 90 percent or more of the time.
2 = This statement is true more than half the time, but not more then 90% of the time.
3 = This statement is seldom true in my school (or of me).
4 = This statement is NOT true in my school (or of me).

Figure 1: Response choices for survey

The subjects ranged from sixth through twelfth grade with 78% being in grades 8-11; 10% in grades six/seven; and 12% being in grade twelve. Reported grades by the girls and young women appear to distribute in a fairly traditional normal distribution. Approximately 82% reported being in the A, B, C range, with 10.5% reporting all As and 6.6% reporting some Ds or Fs.

The survey consisted of seven items to which all subjects were asked to respond and then only to respond to items eight and nine if they answered "1" or "2" to Item seven. The items to which the subjects were asked to respond are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: *Sample of percentage responses to items on survey of girls and young women*

Item	1 (True 90% or more of the	2 (True more than half the	3 (Seldom true in my school –or	4 (Not true in my school-or for	*Mean*

	time)	time but less than 90%).	for me)	me)	
1. Girls in my school talk about being smart with each other.	10%		65%		2.77
2. Girls in my school want boys to think the girls are smart.	18%			10%	2.38
3. Girls in my school get attention from teachers for being smart.	35%	39.3%		8%	2.02
4. Girls in my school get more attention from teachers than boys for being smart.	19.6%			26.5%	2.61
5. Girls in my school get teased by boys for being smart.	6.5%			44.8%	3.18
6. Girls in my school get teased by other girls for being smart.	7.5%			43.3%	3.17
7. I think that I am smart.	57.6%	31.9%		2.9%	1.56
*8. I want people to think that I am smart.	60.8%	29.8%		3%	1.52
*9. I find it difficult to share with others that I am smart.	10.7%	31.7%		38.7%	2.86

Notes: * Only those who responded "1" or "2" to Item 7, answered Items 8 and 9. Not all percentages were included in order to draw a visual awareness to the percentages by response areas. Complete data is available upon request.

In narrative responses to the prompt, "Please write a short paragraph expressing how you feel about how

girls who are smart are treated in your school", general comments from the girls and young women suggest that girls think that all students are treated fairly in their schools and are not treated differently for being smart girls.

Analyses suggest that girls are confident about being viewed as smart. An astonishing 89% of the respondents rated the statement "I believe I am smart" as true 50% or more of the time. Of that 89%, 90.6% "…want people to think I'm smart." Narrative comments suggest that many of the female students viewed being smart as an asset (e.g. "I wish that I could be as smart as some girls in my school so that I could have a good education"). However, 42.4% responded that it is difficult (50 % or more of the time) "to share with others that I am smart."

The majority of the respondents felt that girls do not get teased a lot for being smart by either boys or girls, yet in one of the middle schools, over 50% of the respondents made narrative comments that smart girls are teased and called "geeks" or "nerds". This would suggest forces within that school or community are at work, since in the greater "community" statewide either girls do not view being "smart" as grounds for teasing, or the school environments are well supervised and appropriate behaviors are expected.

In considering how students' perceive teachers treat girls who are smart, the responses to "girls who are smart get attention from their teachers" was extremely positive (73.3% said it was true more than 50% of the time). However, 54.4% indicated that it was "seldom" to "never true" that smart girls get more attention from teachers than smart boys. This may well suggest that teachers treat boys and girls they view as "smart" equally.

Looking at Teachers' Perceptions of Girls and Young Women Relative to Being "Smart"

A random sample of teachers in the schools of the girls and young women who participated in the initial survey was asked to complete a survey on teacher behaviors and teacher perceptions of girls and young women relative to being "smart". The word "smart" was considered a relative construct to an individual's perception, therefore, the teachers in this study were asked to define "smart." The researcher did not want to limit the range of possibilities that might be generated about the thinking of individual teachers relative to the concept of "smart".

Each participant gave several characteristics of "smart" girls. The constant comparative method (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was used to analyze the participants' responses to the definition of "smart" girls. The data were analyzed thematically based on the proportion of respondents (male, female) for each characteristic given. Seventy-five percent of the teachers responded to this item. As shown in Table 2, the majority of the teachers (61.5% males, 55.0% females) defined "smart" girls as those who received good grades. Ten percent of the female teachers defined "smart" girls as those who had common sense. None of the male teachers defined "smart" in that way.

Table 2: *Characteristics of "smart" girls by gender of teacher*

	Gender of Teacher	
Characteristics of "smart" girls	Male	Female
Good Grades	61.5%	55.0%
High Achievement	38.5%	45.0%
Problem Solving Ability	15.4%	25.0%

Extra Curricular Activities	15.4%	0.0%
Responsibility	15.4%	5.0%
Standardized Test Scores	15.4%	5.0%
Good Decision Making	7.7%	5.0%
Common Sense	0.0%	10.0%

Note: Does not equal 100% of respondents since each respondent could provide multiple responses.

Using the same four point scale from the survey given to the middle school and high school girls and young women, teachers were also asked to rate their perceptions of behaviors and actions of teachers in their schools on items related to the perceptions, actions, and behaviors of girls and young women who are "smart." (See Tables 3 and 4)

Table 3: *Descriptive Statistics for teachers' actions on behavior subscale*

	N	Mean	sd
Encouarge girls to take difficult subjects	39	1.31	.521
Acknowledge smart girls and smart boys equally	40	1.38	.667
Encourage smart girls to solve difficult problems	40	1.43	.549
Encourage girls to act smart	40	1.48	.679
Discourage girls from "dumbing down" in class	40	1.50	.751
Give more positive attention to smart girls for getting good grades than to smart boys	40	1.53	.679
Talk to girls about being smart	40	1.82	.675

Note: 1 is a positive response- more than 90% of the time. 4 is a negative response- not at all.

Table 4: *Descriptive statistics of teacher perceptions of the actions of smart girls toward other girls*

	N	Mean	sd
Smart girls assist other girls	41	1.95	.631
Smart girls praise other girls	41	2.10	.768
Smart girls talk to other girls about being smart	41	2.46	.711

Note: 1 is a positive response-more than 90% of the time. 4 is a negative response-not at all.

Further analyses suggested that there were no significant differences in the years of experience, degrees held, or gender of teacher on teachers' perceptions of smart girls academically or socially.

Discussion and Implications for Developing Girls and Young Women into Leaders

Overall female and male teachers identified good grades and high achievement as characteristics of "smart."

Following those two highly identified characteristics, male teachers identified smart girls in terms of participation in extracurricular activities, responsible behavior, and high scores on standardized tests. Conversely, female teachers were more likely to include problem solving abilities and common sense.

Teachers' responses and student responses to the climate in their schools for girls were very similar. It would appear that teachers treat boys and girls who they view as "smart" equally and that the girls and young women themselves perceive that to be so.

The responses that have, perhaps, the most serious implications for developing girls and young women into leaders have to do with the perception of teachers about what constitutes being "smart." With the most attention being given to "good grades", versus problem solving, responsibility, good decision making, or even confidence or vision, it is clear that the expectation for compliant behavior evidenced by good grades may well perpetuate the current dearth of women in leadership.

Conclusion

Since vision (Manasse, 1986) and being smart (Lucas, 2002) are deemed important to leadership for the 21 st century, and since there is a belief that we need smart people to solve problems (Lucas, 2002), this study provided a basis for considering how girls and young women view themselves relative to being "smart." With the powerful influence of teachers on the education of girls and young women, it is imperative that we examine how education contributes to preparing girls and young women to be leaders.

In a country that clearly does not yet have the representation of women in leadership positions at any level that should be expected, it would appear that girls and young women have a positive vision of themselves and others relative to being "smart" and do not feel that that they are teased or treated differently for being so. With teachers' perceptions lending support to the perceptions of the girls and young women that smart girls are treated equally and fairly, it would appear that the social milieu in middle schools and high schools is ripe for concerted efforts to capitalize on these perceptions and help girls and young women explore and develop their skills and abilities through growth and leadership in their current environments. Sorely missing, though is a belief on the part of a number of teachers that problem-solving is a trait of "smart" girls. If this belief is wide spread, then it is critical that work be done with teachers to consider how those skills can be developed in young women.

A narrative statement by one of the young women in the survey is particularly poignant about the power of teachers to contribute to the growth of girls and young women:

> Girls that are smart are treated the same way as girls that have a slower way of learning. So there is really no, Oh, your smart, I'm going to treat you better than him/her because she don't get it as fast as you. But one teacher on this team does [treat students differently]. She figures if you don't get it it's your fault, not her cause she got her education. Mostly girls are having problems with her. But if [she] took time to teach right everybody would do better. (Jacobs, 2002, Student response in survey)

The opportunity appears before us to capitalize on the confidence and vision of the girls and young women in our schools to help them to become the much needed leaders for education, business and government well into the 21 st century.

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Authors

Jacqueline E. Jacobs, Ph.D.
Professor
Department of Educational Leadership & Foundations
Western Carolina University

Cullowhee, NC 28723

E-mail: JJACOBS $@$ wcu.edu

Jacqueline Jacobs has experience as a teacher, administrator and professor on five continents and in five states. She is author of numerous publications and presentations and is active in professional organizations such as, National Council of Professors of Educational Administration and *Phi Delta Kappa*. Jacque does extensive work in schools throughout the southeast.

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