



# And Girl Justice for All

Blending Girl-Specific & Youth Development Practices

by Ann MUNO

She sent a single photograph taken in front of her college sign with the boldfaced caption, "I made it!" I thought back to when I first met Lara seven years earlier in our middle school girls' program. As she developed skills and encountered new opportunities, Lara began to dream of college and to feel worthy to be the first in her family to attend. Now, against many odds, her dream had come true.

At a time when academic gains are elusive for many girls of color who grow up in poverty (Corbett, Hill, & St. Rose, 2008), Lara's defiance of the statistics reflects both her sheer determination and the support of a high-quality, girl-specific youth development program. The program was offered by Powerful Voices, a Seattle-based nonprofit I co-founded to help girls realize their dreams, engage their communities, and shape a better world. One among many efforts to address the equity gap for girls of color, Powerful Voices

intertwines gender- and race-specific practices with evidence-based youth development practices. Using a skills- and strengths-based approach, it combines group meetings and one-on-one mentoring to build trust, communication skills, and goal-setting while exploring the roots of societal injustice through media literacy and anti-racism curricula. Girls use their newly acquired activism skills to develop a culminating project that champions a meaningful issue and fosters positive girl culture. Powerful Voices integrates best practices in girl-specific programming with those of the broader youth development field. Program evaluation results suggest that integrating the two approaches is a winning strategy for promoting academic gains among low-income girls of color.

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## Academic Trends for Girls of Color

Davis Guggenheim's controversial documentary *Waiting for Superman* (2010) suggests several reasons that the educational system puts low-income students of color at a disadvantage. A main conclusion is that low expectations are institutional; these students fall further behind as each school year passes (Chilcott & Guggenheim, 2010). Despite the fact that girls' academic performance has *improved* in the last quarter century, serious inequalities persist for low-income girls of color (Corbett et al., 2008). The gap in college graduation rates among non-white females is telling: In 2006, 37 percent of white women had earned a bachelor's degree or higher, compared with 22 percent of African-American women and only 13 percent of Hispanic women in the same age group (Corbett et al., 2008). High school dropout rates hover around 25 percent for all girls but spike to 50 percent for Native American girls and 40 percent for Latinas and African Americans. Factors that put girls uniquely at risk—beyond the individual, family, and school characteristics that influence all students—include pregnancy, the responsibilities of parenting, sexual harassment and lack of safety, school disciplinary policies, and some families' gender-based rules (National Women's Law Center, 2007).

Since the early 1990s, reformers have steadily documented the nation's failure to educate and socialize girls for the opportunities that the civil rights and women's movements have opened for them (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Orenstein, 1995; Sadker & Sadker, 1994). *Shortchanging Girls, Shortchanging America* (American Association of University Women, 1991) sparked a national conversation on how gender bias hurts girls' self-esteem, school achievement, and career aspirations. Another study on adolescent girls' self-esteem, though based primarily on the experiences of middle-class white girls, found that girls' desire to please others and maintain relationships demands that they silence their own needs and capitulate to gender-based societal expectations (Brown & Gilligan, 1992). More recent research explores the confounding differences *among girls* by race and class. For example, self-confidence, resilience, and views of themselves as leaders are stronger among African-American and Hispanic girls than among white girls (Girl Scouts Research

Institute [GSRI], 2008). One study suggests that girls of color may feel more effective because they are better skilled at advocacy on behalf of themselves and others. Influential factors in this study included positive self-concepts, positive relationships with parents and family, and supportive environments (GSRI, 2011).

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## What Youth Development Programs Can Do

This research signals the important role out-of-school time (OST) program practitioners can play in supporting academics *and* self-confidence by providing a safe environment where girls can develop healthy identities and relationships. Infusing girl-specific practices into high-quality youth development programs need not be difficult or costly. A little bit of intentionality goes a long way. There are strategies

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For example, OST programs can adjust program content or pull girls out for special workshop modules as a way to address how violence, internalized oppression, and low self-efficacy undermine girls' academic achievement and motivation to do well in school. A conflict resolution curriculum, for instance, might aim to build emotional and physical safety in girl-to-girl and mother-daughter relationships. A media literacy and structural racism curriculum could help girls shape an empowered gender and racial identity. Projects can promote social change and activism as critical to girls' struggle for identity.

Another strategy is for program practitioners to use interpersonal practices that empower girls of color and youth in general. Recognizing that healthy female adolescent development hinges on supportive relationships, practitioners must encourage girls to explore their own experiences, rather than projecting some adult version onto them. Unexamined use of adult power can keep girls from developing vitally important life skills. In addition, girls must be able to see their life experiences reflected in the adults who lead the program. Staff, interns, and others involved in running the program should be racially diverse.

## Girl-Specific Program Practices

These “what-you-can-do-now” suggestions reflect current understanding, but it’s important to note that girl-specific programs have been around for more than a century. Legacy heavyweights such as Girl Scouts USA and YWCA, who have paved the way for the rest of us, are still going strong. The Ms. Foundation’s Collaborative Fund for Healthy Girls/Healthy Women deserves much of the credit for using research to forge a common understanding of effective girl-specific practices. In the mid-1990s, the fund made a hefty investment in girls’ programs. It conducted rigorous evaluations to define effective practices and build an infrastructure for evaluating all-girl programming (Ms. Foundation, 2001). The fund involved dozens of girl-specific programs and funders in working together for several years to evaluate program effectiveness. Evaluation efforts by the now-defunct Girl’s Best Friend Foundation, based in Chicago, were also invaluable in shaping a growing understanding of best practices for working with girls (Phillips, 2002). The girl-specific practices that evolved from these foundations’ work include providing:

- Safe spaces in which to form trusting relationships
- Support in developing leadership skills
- Opportunities to create social change (Ms. Foundation, 2001; Phillips, 2002)

*Safe space* as a girl-specific practice reflects an environment that shapes positive, inter-generational relationships among girls and women as

a strategy to counter internalized oppression and girl-on-girl aggression that can lead to school expulsion or dropping out. Developing girls’ leadership skills requires an understanding of gendered elements of leadership. It involves helping girls to develop voice, take action characterized by socio-cultural critique and advocacy, and create opportunities for new experiences (Ms. Foundation, 2001). Essentially, girl-specific programs develop leaders by teaching girls about themselves in relation to the dominant culture and building individual girls’

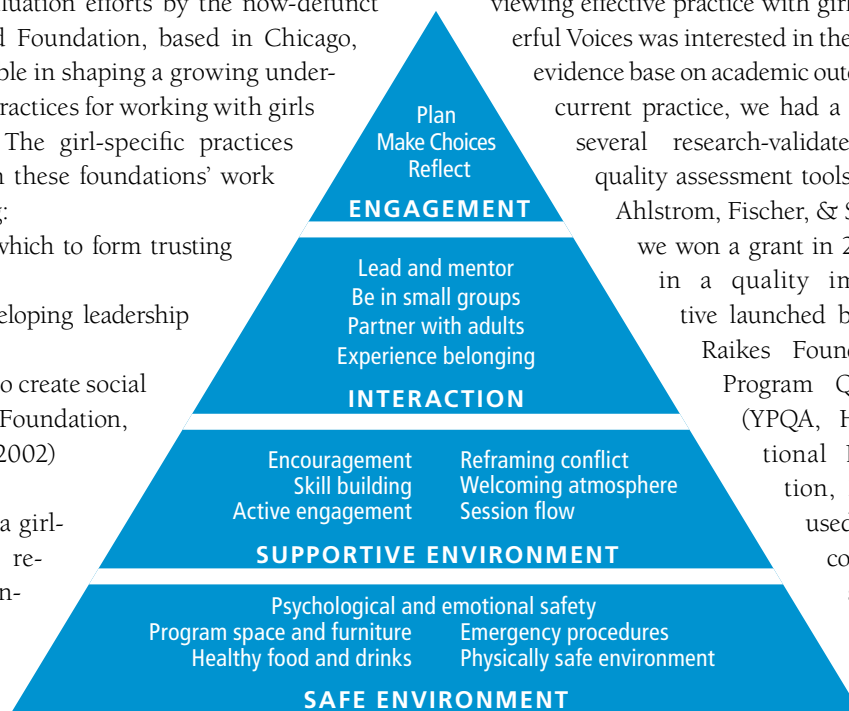
competencies so they can negotiate the education system and other institutions. Providing *social change* opportunities empowers girls to challenge inequities they experience, such as sexual harassment or school rules that seem unreasonable or exclusionary.

Powerful Voices, like other high-quality girl-specific programs, actively employs these practices. Although there is little empirical evidence to tie these practices to academic gains, girl-specific programs aim to improve academic achievement by helping girls to value themselves and create social change while instructing them in “codes of power” (Delpit, 1988), including the classroom behaviors teachers expect from them.

## Choosing a Youth Development Practice Model

A girl-specific practice framework delivers a vital lens for viewing effective practice with girls. In addition, Powerful Voices was interested in the youth development evidence base on academic outcomes. To assess our current practice, we had a choice from among several research-validated, age-appropriate quality assessment tools (Yohalem, Wilson-Ahlstrom, Fischer, & Shinn, 2009). When we won a grant in 2008 to participate in a quality improvement initiative launched by the Seattle-based Raikes Foundation, the Youth Program Quality Assessment (YPQA, HighScope Educational Research Foundation, 2007) was the tool used by the inaugural cohort of grantees, so that became our choice.

The YPQA is based on Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, as shown in



**Figure 1. YPQA’s Hierarchy of Program Characteristics** (Smith et al., 2012, p. 5)

Figure 1 (Smith et al., 2012). *Safe environment*, defined in terms of the physical and emotional safety youth experience, forms the base of the pyramid. *Supportive environment* reflects the practices adults use to support youth, including skill-building, encouragement, and reframing conflict, among others. *Interaction* reflects what adults do to influence the peer culture, such as structuring small groups and opportunities for youth leadership. The top level, *engagement*, reflects opportunities for youth to plan, make choices, and learn from their experiences (Smith et al., 2012).

## Blending Girl-Specific and Youth Development Practices

Powerful Voices' involvement in the quality improvement initiative was transformative. We soon found ourselves aligning our girl-specific programming with practices known to work best in the broader youth development field. During the year-long initiative, we saw not only where our girl-specific model was congruent with YPQA's quality improvement framework, but also where the girl-specific practices added value.

### Common Features

A close look at the two models reveals that both rely on these practice areas:

- **Ensuring safety.** Adult facilitators attend to the physical and emotional well-being of all participants.
- **Attending to peer culture.** Adults actively teach skills, manage conflict, and generally work to develop healthy relationships with and among participants.
- **Developing socio-emotional skills.** Program activities develop skills in communication, collaboration, critical thinking, decision making, and self-direction.
- **Promoting a sense of belonging, higher expectations, and feelings of self-efficacy.** As a group, participants feel that they matter to one another. As individuals, they believe that they have the ability to aim high and accomplish the goals they set for themselves.

"The [YPQA] model tied really well with what we were already doing," said one Powerful Voices instructor, "while giving us a youth development language that was widely spoken."

### Gaps Filled by Girl-Specific Practices

Despite these common features, we discovered a few gaps when integrating girl-specific practices into the YPQA model. For example, the girl-specific framework shaped by the Ms. Foundation study and Powerful Voices' fieldwork views *safety* specifically in terms of developing healthy girl-to-girl and mother-daughter relationships. The *leadership* skills developed in the girl-specific framework help girls shape empowered identities as females of color. They become leaders who challenge society's oppression of people based on gender and race as well as other societal disadvantages such as class, sexual orientation, and ability. Similarly, the girl-specific model promotes *social change and activism* op-

portunities as critical to girls' struggle for identity and their ability to respond to injustice.

We also observed multi-directional movement along the YPQA's pyramid from *safety* to *engagement*. Progress was not linear but dynamic; often one step forward was followed by two steps back. For example, as girls developed trust with instructors and as instructors held higher expectations, some girls disclosed issues of abuse or family chaos that prevented them from working effectively in small groups, a facet of *interaction* in the YPQA pyramid. They might also have trouble planning projects, which falls into the top level of the pyramid, *engagement*. For these girls, the safer they felt with instructors, the more they needed outside support before they could engage with the group as a whole, undertake higher-level projects, and meet higher expectations.

Blending girl-specific and youth development practices was hugely successful in taking Powerful Voices to the next level. Though the two bodies of practice have many features in common, our girl-specific and racial equity practices added value by attending to the cultural context in which these girls lived their lives.

## How Girl-Specific Practices Influenced Academic Achievement

To make the case that our blend of youth development and girl-specific practices helped girls achieve academic success, Powerful Voices collected qualitative program evaluation data from the girls served by our group and one-to-one programs. The programs, offered in public middle and high schools and at community-based sites, serve 100 girls annually, at least 90 percent of whom are low-income girls of color. These girls are generally not making the educational gains hoped for by the girl justice movement.

The research questions for Powerful Voices' evaluation were:

- What are we doing for girls now that will help them academically in the future?
- What role do program instructors play in helping girls gain useful skills?
- Why does girl justice work matter to girls themselves?

With assistance from the University of Washington's School of Social Work, Powerful Voices staff collected and analyzed focus group responses, case histories, and alumnae

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survey data. Ten focus groups were conducted with more than 100 girls over the course of three years. Facilitators led discussions guided by specific questions designed to capture how core program practices—ensuring safety, developing leadership skills, and promoting social change opportunities—translated into program impact. Audio recordings of the discussions were then analyzed for cross-cutting themes.

Powerful Voices instructors documented case histories of three girls who they felt had particularly benefited from program involvement. The instructors documented each girl’s demographic information, cultural background, health, personality traits, and length and type of program involvement. They analyzed field notes for significant turning points in a girl’s identity or shifts in relationships with group members, adult instructors, family members, peers or staff at school, and other community members. Powerful Voices goals—safety, leadership, and activism—were used as a lens to reflect on each girl’s growth.

The alumnae survey reached a non-random sample of 29 young women whom agency staff were able to contact using Facebook, MySpace, e-mail, and phone calls. The alumnae used Survey Monkey to respond to multiple-choice and open-ended questions. In addition to factual questions about the number of years since program involvement and the number of participants with whom respondents were still in touch, open-ended questions asked about how the program affected their lives, relationships, and education and career choices. The survey data were analyzed for themes related to these questions.

Taken together, these data gave us a sense of how program practices benefited girls academically. Our findings included these observations:

- Experiencing a **positive girl culture** helped girls experience worthiness and belonging, which in turn could empower them at school.
- Girls developed **higher expectations** for themselves—including their academic futures—as well as for others.
- Developing **attitudes and skills** that specifically addressed the root reasons that these girls struggled academically was an important strategy for promoting school success.

These findings suggest that the three girl-specific practices—ensuring safety, developing leadership skills, and providing opportunities for activism—are valuable because they attend to the cultural context in which these girls, with their lack of income and racial advantages, live their lives and struggle to achieve academically.

### **Experiencing a Positive Girl Culture**

Our findings show that girls experienced belonging in the program’s positive girl culture. As a result, they felt a sense of self-worth that empowered them at school and elsewhere.

The case of Lara, who opened this article with a photo from college, is illustrative. Lara came to Powerful Voices by accident—she thought the program focused

on singing. As the curriculum moved into examining body image and the media, Lara anchored her choices in her growing understanding of society’s pressures on young women. She became more articulate in group discussions. Her attitude shifted from saying, “I’m ignoring you because you’re mean” to “I’m making the choice to ignore you because I love myself, and I’m not going to sink to your level.” Herself struggling to accept her weight, Lara adopted the critique of “skinny culture” she learned from the comedian

Mo’Nique. Lara learned not only to accept her body but also take care of it with diet and exercise, joining a volleyball team later that year. Lara became a staunch advocate for a positive girl culture in the school community. She rallied her Powerful Voices group with this wisdom, inspiring other girls to stay away from “girl drama” and to see Lara as a role model. Her developmental trajectory took a new direction.

For many girls, participation in Powerful Voices exposed them for the first time to forms of self-expression that emphasized values and a positive view of their gender. A focus group participant described it this way: “We can be who we are without any shame with it. We can stand up; we can speak out.” As girls developed a sense of belonging, we heard this kind of language: “I have learned that Powerful Voices is our girl culture and is a better way to express ourselves.” The girls took this newfound power into other areas of their lives. One girl explained, “If I can open up inside the group, I can open

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up outside the group.” Participants reported that they started speaking up in class, joining enrichment activities, and expanding their peer groups. They felt that what they contributed at school mattered. One girl, for example, successfully challenged her teacher to celebrate Black History month. Another took over a display case in the school hallway, where she showcased a mannequin covered with positive statements about girls’ bodies, in contrast to the messages in mainstream media. By forging a healthy gender and cultural identity in a safe environment and by learning to deconstruct and challenge media, girls developed the ability to negotiate power, at school and elsewhere, from a position of self-worth.

### **Developing Higher Expectations**

Girls’ expectations for themselves shifted. They also developed higher expectations of others. When they become aware of greater possibilities for their academic future, they wanted more for themselves without feeling they were betraying where they came from. For example, Lara disclosed a great deal during one-on-one mentoring time about her circumstances: domestic violence, an alcoholic parent, periodic homelessness, her grandmother’s death, the hardships that go with poverty. Lara felt she was the only mature member of her family, often carrying the burdens of others. Still, she somehow maintained excellent performance in school. Lara developed higher expectations when she confronted the anger and shame associated with negative gender identity and her socioeconomic circumstances. She discovered that she had the power to access new opportunities. Supportive female mentors were instrumental in helping girls reframe their expectations. One girl noted, “I’m always going to have goals for myself, but sometimes it helps when I tell other people so I can achieve them.”

Equally important was when girls expressed hard emotions—particularly betrayal and anger—toward mothers or mother figures. Then they could shift from anger and shame to pride and compassion. One girl reported: “I started asking my mom more questions about herself, even though I didn’t want to be like her. We began to fight less and listen more.” Another girl put it this way: “Here I built self-confidence and understood my mom instead of just getting mad at her point of view

at the situation.” This shift often came when girls began to develop a social critique of how women and people of color are devalued in mainstream culture. The girls developed more compassion for their mothers when they could see that the older women had experienced many of the same forces—poverty, low expectations, lack of access to opportunity—that they themselves were struggling to overcome.

In Powerful Voices, our girl-specific practices of fostering safety, developing leadership, and providing social change opportunities led to improved academic behaviors, social skills, and interpersonal behavior.

### **Developing Attitudes and Skills That Promote School Success**

By developing attitudes and skills that girls need to succeed—communication skills, for example, and pride in racial and gender identity—we influenced girls’ motivation to do well and stay in school. Lara’s case concluded with a happy ending: she won a full scholarship to the historically Black college she chose to attend. Pride in her racial identity was a factor in her choice. She had experienced strategies Powerful Voices uses to promote healthy racial identity, such as in-depth workshops on structural racism and ongoing opportunities to examine how internalized racism lowers educational expectations and motivation. Lara explained the value she now places on high educational expectations: “Here, they take education very seriously! If you obtain a C– in a class, you automatically failed that course. Saying that, I feel like I have made a good choice coming here because I too take education seriously” (personal correspondence, September 2011).

In addition, Lara’s success was a result of having learned skills to help her function in school. Another program participant said:

I learned how to handle things different, not to yell at my teacher over little things and that there are other ways you can handle problems. I learned to not listen to gossip and to not let people’s words get the best of you.

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Powerful Voices instructors teach girls to take schoolwork seriously, actively participate in class, and communicate in ways that keep them from getting into trouble. Furthermore, the process of building pride in gender identity influenced colleges and majors girls selected. An alumna reflected, “I realized part of the reason I am interested in Women and Gender Studies as a major is because of Girls’ RAP [a Powerful Voices middle school program].”

## Implications and Recommendations

In *Powerful Voices*, our girl-specific practices of fostering safety, developing leadership, and providing social change opportunities led to improved academic behaviors, social skills, and interpersonal behavior. In practice, it is not a big stretch to square girl-specific and evidence-based practices aimed at improving the quality of youth development programming generally.

Youth development professionals can actively work to integrate practices and teach skills that shape a positive girl culture and healthy female relationships. Girl-specific practices address the relational and cultural context *among females* and empower girls to confront harmful societal expectations within girl culture itself as well as those that circumvent individual academic gains and prevent social change. Experts suggest that healthy female relationships contribute to the well-being of girls; girls make important decisions in the context of female relationships (Brown, Duff, & Way, 1999; Brown & Gilligan, 1992). Healthy female relationships, built on effective communication skills, can interrupt a variety of detrimental issues that cascade over time. For example, one in four adolescent girls have been involved in a serious fight (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2009), and girls who have been expelled from school are twice as likely as those who have not to become depressed in later life (McCarthy et al., 2008). Meanwhile, effective mother-daughter communication has potential to stem the rise in girls' involvement in the juvenile justice system; arrests due to fights with mothers is a significant factor in this growth (Hawkins, Graham, Williams, & Zahn, 2009).

Youth development programs—girl-specific or not—can promote the well-being and educational achievement of *all* youth by incorporating exploration of the impact of media as well as the historical effects of structural racism. Programs can partner with a media watchdog organization such as Miss Representation or a girl-specific community-based organization to build a media literacy curriculum. They might also consult with organizations doing racial equity work, for example, the Aspen Institute Roundtable on Community Change or the Southern Poverty Law Center, to develop staff training and youth programming.

Framing skill development in terms of what Delpit (1988) calls “the codes of power” is another powerful approach. Delpit explains that young people of color need an explicit understanding of classroom rules that are often implicit and unstated. Further, she suggests, these expectations and the language we use to communicate

them are the “codes of power” that young people need to learn how to use. Teaching youth about the arbitrariness of those codes and the power relationships they represent is also an essential strategy (Delpit, 1988).

At the same time, cultural competency requires practitioners to be skilled at understanding how power and powerlessness function in girls' lives. Programs should work to develop staff members' understanding of how privilege and oppression affect their interactions with girls. All staff must learn to view the program's culture and policies through an equity lens. Striving to ensure that the field represents those we serve is also essential to cultural responsiveness.

The effects of *Powerful Voices*' three core gender-specific practices—safety, leadership, and activism—on the social and academic lives of our participants suggests that these practices, as defined specifically for girls of color, deserve to be added to the list of features of positive youth development. The areas of gender and racial equity deserve more research, as practitioners seek to apply different methods for different populations in different settings rather than using a one-size-fits-all model.

Although girls have made extraordinary gains in educational and economic access in the past several decades, these gains have not been shared equitably by women and girls of color from high-poverty backgrounds (U.S. Department of Commerce & Executive Office of the President, 2011). Youth development and girl-specific programs have done a great deal—and have a great deal more to do—to equip girls like Lara to meet the opportunities and challenges of the 21st century world while also challenging its injustices.

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