

Summary of Research on ACT NOW

Since its founding in 2000, the innovative agency ACT NOW! has challenged and empowered adolescent girls by providing them with a unique, participatory, artistic experience. Psychologists at Mount Holyoke College, Maureen Babineau and Becky Wai-Ling Packard, conducted a study to investigate the girls' learning outcomes. From examining the data collected during 37 interviews, psychologists determined that the ACT NOW! improvised movie making program was ubiquitously beneficial to many aspects of the girl's lives. Parents, community leaders, and teachers consistently praised the program for increasing the girls' self-esteem and communication skills.

Participants in the February 2007 study unanimously described their experiences as positive, motivating, and full of excitement. Girls learned to cooperate with one another in a wholly female environment by building teamwork skills and forming friendships. The work the girls undertook challenged gender stereotypes. One participant's mother commented that she was impressed that the process enabled the girls to play *all* the roles in the video. Gender-blind casting forced girls to branch out from the conventional commercial female characters. Eliminating co-ed distractions, such as impressing boys, created an atmosphere that empowered the girls. The study found that participants focused on problem-solving and connecting with one another intellectually and emotionally.

The psychologists reported "the self-esteem increases appeared to be related to the program's design to elicit and take seriously the ideas of the participants." When asked about their experiences, participants mentioned the level of self-respect they gained, noting that this developed from the validation continuously given to them by faculty. Not only did the staff validate participants' ideas but they also remained thoughtful listeners throughout the program. The study described the "ACT NOW! Staff [as having] very good communication with the girls and [as being] especially skilled at guiding the process." This essential part of the program was shown to have positive lasting effects on participants.

When study participants were questioned about what they learned or gained from the program, they listed a variety of benefits. On a creative level, girls gained experience from working with cameras, developing storylines, and creating characters. For many participants, this had a strong impact on their writing skills. On an emotional level, girls learned to be more

outgoing and gained the courage to try new activities. Researchers found that the collaborative environment helped participants find their voices, and inspired them to share it with others.

Working within the fast-paced environment exposed participants to the advantage of being able to think on their feet. One girl acknowledged that she felt more prepared for job interviews because of the improvisation skills she learned from the ACT NOW! program. Taking on organizational aspects of the process and leadership positions, taught girls that they were capable of contributing far beyond their initial expectations. Often it was the most difficult challenging parts of the process, such as improvisation, that enabled the girls to develop their skills. Even those who had no prior exposure to theatre or performing arts developed skills. Some reported finding a specific area in which to excel.

The study points out many of the positive outcomes that extend beyond the boundaries of the program. These include transfer of positive self-regulatory skills such as problem solving and decision making, broadened academic and personal interests, and enhanced group interaction capabilities. Participants took skills learned in the program and used them in their daily life, at home, and with peers. For many girls, the program broadened their perception of the arts. It also enabled them to envision new career paths. Joining new clubs, such as the school drama club, and developing interests in other aspects of theatre, such as costume design, was a common trend among participants who were inspired by their ACT NOW! experience. Girls even sought out leadership roles in their communities and schools after finding their voices while participating in the ACT NOW! program. In speaking of the study's findings, Packard observed that the "ACT NOW [program] has found a recipe for empowering girls."