

# How Girls Learn

Girls' schools are well equipped to nurture future leaders, especially when we deepen our understanding of the ways leadership expresses itself.

by Lillian Waller

Turns out, several decades of social science research aligns with what teachers experience in the classroom: boys and girls are hardwired to learn differently. While girls thrive on verbal problem-solving and generally develop those skills early, boys' brains excel at hands-on, spatial-mechanical tasks. Girls can, in general, focus for long periods of time while boys need more physical activity and their brains benefit from small breaks—which coheres with what we know about boys' skill at single tasks and girls' agility moving from one task to another.

What's more, the differences between how boys and girls learn are not only neurological but also cultural and behavioral, that is, some distinctions are acquired and emerge over time. Without any intervention as they grow older, for example, girls tend to shy away from STEM subjects, experience more anxiety, and lose confidence in themselves and their abilities.

But how do these differences translate to learning

environments? Can all-girl schools offer educational and social benefits that co-ed schools do not? And can they nurture future leaders?

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President of the International Coalition of Girls Schools

International Student Assessment (PISA), which surveyed more than 60,000 fifteen-year-old girls in twelve countries, students at girls' schools report a greater sense of wellbeing and belonging than girls attending co-ed schools.

These students also report a greater sense of purpose and meaning in their lives. They tend to view their teachers as being more encouraging and more enthusiastic about their jobs. PISA, and a preponderance of other data, confirms what we already know about the benefits of girl-centred educational environments: that they develop academically and emotionally strong girls who are poised to become future leaders.

**MEGHAN MURPHY**, global executive director of the International Coalition of Girls Schools (ICGS), concurs. "What girls' schools do so well is create a sense of belonging for girls that is absent, a lot of times, in co-ed schools," Murphy says, noting that representation matters. "So, I think really making sure at a co-ed school that girls are running for office, that they're not just running to be secretary of the student government, but they're running to be President. And if you're not seeing that in a co-ed school, then I think you need to

ask yourself why. What is in the culture or what is in the process? And how can the adults in the community be mentors or sponsors or simply tap girls on the shoulder to say, 'I think you would be really good in this particular leadership role, and here's why.'

"When you design a school for girls, not just with girls, every curricular decision, every hiring decision, every facility that is built is designed with a girl at the centre. It's ongoing work. We're always trying to build on our understanding of how girls learn best."

This thinking jives with what **DR. ALEXANDRA LESK**, English and Ethics Teacher and Instructional Lead at York House School, has discovered in her own classroom. A former York House student who found that a co-ed environment worked better for her own personal development, Dr. Lesk nevertheless explains that our expectations of all-girls schools as well as the approaches and goals of the schools themselves have changed dramatically in the last few decades.

"The world has changed. It's not the 80s anymore," Dr. Lesk says. "And we're not being asked to keep our knees together and be polite. We are encouraging girls to take up space in the world." Dr. Lesk also notes the need to counteract harmful behaviors as they grow into adulthood, including the tendencies toward perfectionism that appear in teenage girls who are grappling with issues of confidence and social expectations.



Top to Bottom: Meghan Murphy (President of the International Coalition of Girls Schools), Dr. Charlotte Jacobs (Director of the Independent School Teaching Residency Program at the University of Pennsylvania), and Simone Marean (Co-Founder and Co-CEO of Girls Leadership).

“I explain to them how to counteract that and not be perfectionist, to use a rubric and do what you need to do to get to the level that you want to get to, and then you move on with your life rather than polishing and protecting or perfecting things,” she explains. “I talk directly to my students about this. Don’t waste your

time polishing an apple. If it’s not going to benefit you, it’s going to taste the same. Go out and be. Have a wide range of experiences.”

Different girls experience different challenges, whether in an all-girls or co-ed environment, especially girls of colour who may encounter racism or bias. The adults these girls encounter at school—teachers, counselors, coaches—may not even see them as leaders, especially as society often disagrees about what leadership looks like.

**SIMONE MAREAN**, co-founder and co-CEO of Girls Leadership, works with both public and independent schools and girl-serving organizations to help girls find their voice and inspire them to lead. Her definition of leadership is based on a quote attributed to Sheryl Sandberg: “Leadership is about making others better as a result of your presence and making sure the impact lasts in your absence.” It’s a perspective that Marean not only believes in but also teaches.

And, it is fundamentally relational—that is, based on relationships—a key way that girls learn.

“The ways that girls show up, the world doesn’t always see them as leaders,” Marean explains, noting that society’s typical view of leadership is based on a model that is transactional and hierarchical. “So, when girls make sure that somebody has a place to sit at lunch, they’re making the



Dr. Alexandra Lesk (YHS Senior School English and Ethics Teacher and Instructional Lead).

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world a better place. Or, they ask the question in class that their peers are afraid to ask. The world looks at what girls do and calls it kindness. When a company is growing or a government leader is doing a good job, those are big ways of making things better for other people and having that impact last in your absence. But there are little ways that girls do this every day that are not always valued or seen as leadership.”

Girls Leadership conducted a study on the intersectional factors that impact the leadership skill development and aspirations of Black and Latina girls from 12 to 18 years old. Authored by **DR. CHARLOTTE JACOBS**, the report of the study’s findings, Ready to Lead, found that our narrow frame of leadership as “transactional and one-directional, rather than participatory” strikes at the heart of the misperception that girls of colour aren’t or can’t be leaders—even as these girls both test and self-identify as leaders at significantly higher

rates than their white peers.

Dr. Jacobs, who is director of the Independent School Teaching Residency Program at University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education, co-led a pilot study in 2021 for ICGS, Supporting the Strengths and Needs of BIPOC Girls in Independent Schools. Similar to the Ready to Lead study, Dr. Jacobs found that teacher bias played a significant role in whether girls of color were deemed to have the capacity to lead.

“What we found is that girls of colour, particularly Black and Latina girls, tend to see themselves as leaders early on,” says Dr. Jacobs. “Particularly in predominantly white schools, they see themselves as needing to advocate for themselves and for others. They feel as if they’re being treated unfairly, or that one of their classmates is being treated unfairly, and that they have to say something about it. So, getting comfortable with standing up for themselves and speaking out and speaking up translates into the traditional

leadership roles that they may pursue later on.

“[The key is] how these skills are viewed by teachers, particularly white teachers in school. Instead of seeing these skills as ones to support, as ones to praise, [teachers] often see [the behaviors] as deficits. So, seeing Black girls as ‘loud’ or ‘angry’ or ‘disruptive’ rather than seeing that this is coming from a place of activism and advocacy and feeling as if they need to stand up for themselves.”

But leadership development isn’t necessarily baked into the DNA of girls’ schools, as Marean, Dr. Jacobs and Dr. Lesk all point out.

Less than 100 years ago, all-girl school environments were designed primarily to perpetuate circumscribed social roles. Girls’ schools were mostly so-called finishing schools where attractiveness and refined manners were more important than leadership skills. Today’s independent schools must be intentional about being a liberatory space that opens up possibilities for all girls. 🌀