

What Research from Girls' Schools Reveals About Collaboration & Confidence in Girls

Girls are known for their strong collaborative skills and their enjoyment of social. However, they often face significant challenges when it comes to working collaboratively due to anxiety, fear of being judged, and perfectionist tendencies. These challenges lead to less enjoyment in their collaborative work. The 2023-2024 ICGS Global Action Research Collaborative on Girls' Education (GARC) sought to address these challenges. Addressing the theme “Engaging the Power of Many Voices: Leveraging girls’ collaborative spirit toward courageous and joyful learning,” the reports offer specific strategies to improve collaboration and foster a joyful classroom environment.

While there were many takeaways from the GARC reports, these themes emerged frequently: that collaboration builds confidence and academic risk-taking, that collaboration is an effective tool for enhancing creativity and joy, and that collaborative classroom work can strengthen personal relationships. Interestingly, many of the reports note the lingering effects of COVID that have led to decreased confidence in girls, a reduction in their ability to collaborate, and a lingering sense of anxiety. However, it’s clear that those effects are diminishing and the strategies implemented here are part of the solution to put girls on a path to increased confidence and joy, leading to greater success in school and beyond.

Collaboration as a Confidence Builder

One of the most significant findings across the studies is the role of collaboration in building students’ confidence. Many reports noted that they wanted their students to engage in more academic risk-taking thereby increasing students’ confidence in their abilities. Across many disciplines, teachers noted that students who took more academic risks were more successful. Research bears this out, and so many of the GARC sought out strategies that would facilitate risk-taking and increase students’ confidence in tackling their academic work.

For instance, [Isobel Barczyk](#) utilized the SAIL method from Harvard’s Project Zero in addition to her own tool for structured collaborative essay planning in English, focusing on helping students trust their planning processes in preparation for high stakes exams. [Nick Fitness](#) also used a structured approach, applying Harkness discussions in History to enhance engagement and encourage intellectual risk-taking, emphasizing active listening and class norms. Both approaches significantly boosted students’ confidence. Barczyk’s

method strengthened individual planning and peer validation, while Fitness's approach fostered a more dynamic exchange of ideas and active participation in discussions.

Fostering Creativity and Joy Through Collaboration

Collaboration proved an effective tool for fostering creativity and joy in learning. [Samanda Sankowsky's](#) research on using improv gameplay in a social entrepreneurship program is a prime example. She found that playful collaboration inspired students to take risks and embrace mistakes, key skills for success in entrepreneurship. The joy and engagement generated through these activities led to a deeper understanding of social entrepreneurship concepts and a greater willingness to participate in collaborative projects.

We don't always consider space when it comes to collaboration. [Paige North's](#) exploration of the relationship between learning spaces and collaboration revealed that different environments can significantly enhance creative risk-taking and communication skills. By allowing students to choose their workspaces, including unconventional locations like museums, North found that students were more empowered and engaged in their collaborative efforts. Her research further demonstrated that these varied environments not only fostered creativity but also brought joy to the learning process. As students moved beyond the confines of traditional classrooms, they experienced a newfound sense of agency, confidently curating exhibitions that connected art with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals.

Enhancing Social Connections and Social-Emotional Skills

Another key theme from these latest GARC reports is the impact of collaboration on social connections and emotional learning. [Kate Giles'](#) research with a Year 3 class focused on the development of social-emotional skills, specifically self-management and self-awareness. Through collaborative activities, students created personal "toolkits" for emotional regulation, which not only enhanced their ability to manage emotions but also deepened connections with peers and family members. The involvement of parents in the SEL process reinforced these skills at home, leading to improved student engagement, well-being, and academic outcomes.

[Alexandra van der Loos's](#) research in a Year 10 science classroom also underscores aspects of relationship building through collaboration, but with a focus on older students working on shared environmental projects. Her project centered around Wairau Creek, where students worked in self-directed groups to develop environmental action plans. This collaborative effort not only enhanced their systems thinking skills but also fostered trust and stronger interpersonal connections. The relationships formed among peers and with

community members empowered students to confidently share ideas and take collective action.

These reports highlight the transformative power of collaboration in girls' education. By building confidence, enhancing social connections, reducing anxiety, and fostering creativity, collaboration can lead to better academic outcomes and a more joyful learning experience.

As educators, it's essential to prioritize collaborative learning strategies to empower students and prepare them for the complex challenges of the future.

Practical Applications and Recommendations

1. **Structured Learning Routines:** Implement routines like Harvard Project Zero's Thinking Routines, such as the SAIL method, across different subjects to build students' critical thinking and confidence.
2. **Digital Collaboration Tools:** Utilize digital platforms like shared documents and discussion boards to facilitate ongoing collaboration inside and outside the classroom.
3. **Regular Reflection:** Incorporate reflection sessions through journaling or group discussions to help students internalize the value of collaboration.
4. **Peer Evaluation:** Include peer assessments in the evaluation process to hold students accountable and enhance collaborative skills.
5. **Outcome Reflection:** Guide students in reflecting on their collaborative versus individual achievements to deepen their appreciation for teamwork.
6. **Clear Ground Rules:** Set expectations for collaboration, emphasizing respect and active listening to create a supportive classroom culture.
7. **Flexible Learning Spaces:** Use alternative spaces like outdoor areas or museums to foster creativity and enhance collaboration.
8. **Joyful Activities:** Incorporate fun, engaging activities like gamified learning and improv to reduce anxiety and encourage joyful collaboration.