

# Collective VOICES YOUNG FEMINISTS' EXPERIENCES at POWER CAMP

by Stephanie Austin

*Cet article évalue l'impact du camp POWER sur les jeunes femmes qui y participent. Ce camp (Partnerships on Women's Educational Realities) a été fondé pour favoriser les rencontres entre les jeunes femmes qui veulent faire la promotion d'une communauté équitable.*

Stephanie Austin, Tatiana Fraser, and Willow Scobie co-founded Partnerships On Women's Educational Realities (POWER Camp) in February 1995. We designed POWER Camp to create opportunities for young feminists to work directly with other young women to promote equity in our communities. In particular, POWER Camp seeks to acknowledge, validate and address the issues which directly affect the lives of young women today through its educational activities. We focus on the physical and mental health of young women (physical inactivity, low self-esteem, difficulties with body image); violence against women (date-rape, sexual harassment); systemic silencing of women (young women's loss of voice); young women's lack of "power" (in the sense of "ability to" not "power over"); and, barriers in young women's development (school life, career choices, economic status).

We address these issues by using an approach that is distinct from most programming geared at young women. Our approach challenges the social construction of female adolescence as "a problematic period" and instead offers young women and girls the chance to define their adolescent life experience in whatever way they choose. The educational programs designed and implemented by the POWER Camp project are based on an empowerment model as opposed to a "woman as problem" model.

We originally developed POWER Camp as a summer day camp for girls between the ages of 11 and 15 years old. In addition, we provide follow-up workshops and special events throughout the school year for past participants. We coordinate workshops and organize presentations and conferences in community settings to fulfill POWER Camp's commitment to public education regarding adolescent girls' issues. Recently, POWER Camp has been extended beyond the Ottawa region to offer similar programs in Vancouver, Montreal, Toronto, and other communities across Canada.

## Feminist program evaluation

POWER Camp was created with the intention of putting

feminist theory to practice. All the work that the organization does with adolescent girls, educators, parents, funders, and other groups relies on feminist principles. A feminist framework, which values subjectivity, authentic

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coming to voice, difference/diversity, participation, equity, and recognizing how research can contribute to social change (Kirby and McKenna) also grounded the research process.

We created a feminist program evaluation intended to assess the impact of POWER Camp's programs on the young women and girls who participated in the program. This program evaluation, called *Collective Voices*, has been a chance to explore whether POWER Camp is meeting its outcomes. The four POWER Camp goals of increasing participants' self-esteem, coping strategies, awareness, and critical thinking skills are the foundation upon which our qualitative study has been developed and carried out. Our research process has been guided by our desire to hear directly from participants what impact their experience at POWER Camp has had on their sense of self, their ability to cope, their understanding of issues, and their capacity to critically analyze. The research questions addressed in this particular evaluation are the following: 1) Has the desired change occurred in the lives of participants? 2) Can this change be attributed to participants' involvement in POWER Camp? and 3) Which aspects of the program contributed most to this change?

## Methods

In developing an evaluation methodology we took particular note of the following statement by Patton: "The evaluator's scientific observation is some person's real life experience. Respect for the latter must precede respect for the former" (143). We selected the interview method (in-person and on the telephone) for the study because it enables the person being interviewed to respond in her

own words and at her own pace (Kirby and McKenna). She can express, for example, her own personal perspective on the change that has or has not occurred in her through her experience at POWER Camp. This method makes it possible to capture the subtle complexities of the participants' perceptions and experiences (Patton).

Interestingly, in working with a population of adolescent girls, talking on the telephone was an excellent and effective means of communication for them. The telephone survey method used in *Collective Voices* in fact provided a methodological forum through which a strong combination of depth and breadth could be achieved. Our chosen interview method thus made it possible for us to facilitate a process whereby young women would feel

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comfortable sharing their thoughts, opinions, and feelings about their experience at POWER Camp, and to clearly articulate the impact this experience has had on their lives. This methodology also recognized the importance of creating a forum in which the voices of girls may be heard as experts on their own experience. As Reinharz suggests,

By listening to women speak, understanding women's membership in particular social systems, and establishing the distribution of phenomena accessible only through sensitive interviewing, feminist researchers have uncovered previously neglected or misunderstood worlds of experience. (44)

As the evaluator in this project, and as a POWER Camp co-founder, I think that our methodological approach gave us the opportunity to listen to girls and further understand their realities..

## Results

Participants clearly expressed changes in themselves related to their involvement with POWER Camp. The main over-arching themes that emerged from the data were the changes in participants' coping strategies, self-esteem, critical thinking skills, and overall level of awareness since their involvement with POWER Camp. The environment created at POWER Camp, based on feminist principles of respect for women's voices, opinions, and thoughts, contributes to whether participants acquire coping strategies or not, as well as how these coping strategies are used in participants' lives from that moment on.

*At POWER Camp in most cases when you said something,*

*you could express yourself without being criticized, so in class or with my friends I thought back to POWER Camp and I was able to share my opinions.*

The impact that learning such coping strategies has on the lives of participants proved to be significant in this research. For example,

*My ability to cope has changed a lot (since my involvement with POWER Camp), before whenever a problem would come up, I wouldn't address it at all, now when a problem comes up with my friends I'll talk about it right away and it will be solved with no hard feelings.*

Overall, the coping strategies acquired, the approach or environment in which participants had a chance to learn these skills, and the impact that this learning has had on girls' lives after camp can be summed up by this quote:

*It really made what I believed stronger like before POWER Camp, I thought smoking is a bad thing, I won't smoke, but then I learned more about why you shouldn't and stuff and then at school this year there are a bunch of kids in my class that smoke and they, I'm not sure if I agree with them, I am never ever going to do that and I don't think that I would have been that sure if I hadn't gone to POWER Camp cause I didn't know.*

As can be expected when working with such fluid concepts as self-esteem, coping, awareness and critical thinking, there was some overlap between concepts. The intersection between self-esteem and coping can be noted in this example:

*The difference in my ability to cope since POWER Camp has to do with self-esteem, after POWER Camp I know that when I'm feeling like I can't do it, or maybe I should quit, POWER Camp made me realize that I can keep going, I can cope with this problem, it kinda has to do with self-esteem.*

This participant links her ability to cope in difficult situations with how she feels about herself. Her increase in self-confidence therefore has influenced her ability to use her coping strategies in tough situations.

A distinction between the discourse surrounding self-esteem and the actual experience of increased self-esteem became clear to me as I was working with the data. Many participants reported not experiencing an increase in self-esteem through their involvement with POWER Camp. However, these same participants often gave examples of changes in their behaviour since POWER Camp that were indicative of an increase in self-esteem. To explore this further, an attempt to contextualize the realities of girls is important. In recent years, there has been a lot of discussion about adolescent girls' low self-esteem in the media,

among parents, and in schools. Based on my experience working with young women, I suggest that they are tired of hearing about self-esteem and to what extent they are inadequate in this domain. Having nothing to do with how they actually feel about themselves, their response to questions related to self-esteem is something like “yeah, yeah, my self-esteem is just fine thank-you, now lets get to the important stuff.” As an example, one participant who reported that her involvement with POWER Camp did not noticeably affect her self-esteem later said:

*POWER Camp affected me in a positive way because it really helped me in expressing my opinions, when I said my opinions they just cared about what I said, before I'd be too scared and now I am way less scared and way more open, I'll really express my opinion in class and stuff.*

Clearly, this participant identifies a change in her ability to express her opinions since her experience at POWER Camp where she was listened to and acknowledged as a person who has valuable ideas to contribute to group discussions.

Other participants' responses to questions more indirectly related to self-esteem, which were posed to find out more about girls' actual experience of how they feel about themselves as opposed to their reaction to the concept of self-esteem, were that “the big point is I can do stuff if I want to, and I don't have to do everything everyone else tells me” and “I am able to talk to people more and feel better about myself in general and have more self-confidence.” Specific behaviour changes that were used as examples of how POWER Camp changed these young women's sense of self-worth were “before I used to think that I am too fat, now I don't really care, I know I am fine” and “I stopped letting my friends walk all over me and I stopped paying attention to a lot of the magazine articles to lose weight and diet pills and all that.” Another participant said:

*When we did that creative movement thing, I kinda felt like I had to do what everybody else was doing, so no one would laugh at me but then as time went on, I realized that I could move around and no one would laugh at me for just being myself.*

This statement is particularly poignant given that it is coming from a girl going through adolescence, which is typically a time of discomfort with one's changing body, as well as a time at which peers' impressions are very important in self-definition. The young woman's ability to recognize that at first she felt uncomfortable and was concerned about other people's judgment of her, but that as time went on she could express herself fully without having to fear or be inhibited by the impressions of others, supports the finding that POWER Camp has a significant positive impact on participants' self-esteem.

The findings regarding critical thinking skills are not as clear as the previous themes. Participants gave some examples of very different contexts or situations in which they were able to increase their ability to think critically. One participant explains that critical thinking means being able to define herself by her own standards, not by comparing herself to what she sees in magazines. “Critical thinking to me related to the POWER Camp was sort of how people chose to see themselves and not, like especially compared to the magazines.” She is capable of critically analyzing what she sees around her and making decisions about her own identity. Another participant explains critical thinking as an ability to see things from a different perspective and to learn how people think differently:

**“I stopped letting my friends walk all over me and I stopped paying attention to a lot of the magazine articles to lose weight and diet pills and all that.”**

*I was able to see things from a different perspective when the old Native woman came and talked to us, it was neat how she saw things in a really different way and I think that helped me understand a bit why people think differently.*

Another participant explains critical thinking by using the example of a situation in which not all information is made available to certain people. With this knowledge, she is able to take a position of disagreement with a commonly held cultural belief:

*When we learned about Burma, I found that lots of people say that lots is being done about world conflict, I disagree because there's lots, like Burma, that we don't know about. Seeing and learning really opened my eyes to what's really going on—it's pretty bad over there. We take everything for granted.*

While the topics chosen to express what participants have become critical about since their involvement with POWER Camp differ from one participant to the next, and even from one moment to the next in the same interview, the fact remains that critical thinking was discovered as a tool that could be used in many diverse contexts to challenge commonly held assumptions about the world. The impact of these newly acquired critical thinking skills is explored in the following quote:

*During the teacher's strike um the teachers would always say that the government was wrong and they shouldn't be doing that and stuff but then my parents agreed with the government so I had to look at it a different way than*

*both of them to figure out how I felt about it.*

At POWER Camp girls learn to be critical of information that is presented to them from various sources; they learn to formulate and articulate their own opinions about important issues. Being in a place where their voices and opinions can be heard and acted upon contributes to their sense of empowerment.

The research findings suggest that participants increased their awareness during their experience at POWER Camp. It was sometimes difficult for participants to remember the details about all the different things they had learned. The examples they used did however clearly indicate some level of integration of new concepts and ideas they had been exposed to at POWER Camp. Some participants said that their awareness had increased about a specific area such as "the wendo self-defense, I had never heard of it before" or "I learned a lot of things about AIDS that I didn't know before". Generally a statement such as "I think I'm more aware of what's going on in the world" supports the conclusion that POWER Camp had a significant impact on participants' level of awareness.

The way participants were able to increase their awareness also seemed to be an important aspect of the learning process for them. For instance, when learning about HIV/AIDS at POWER Camp compared to learning about it at school, one participant commented on the difference in the way the facilitators approached the topic. She suggests that "it wasn't like they were trying to completely scare you, they knew more what they were talking about than they do at school." POWER Camp's approach to learning and teaching, its pedagogy, is based on empowerment. Traditional educational settings use a top-down approach to education, which is fundamentally disempowering for most learners. Altering the dynamics from a fear based authoritarian type of pedagogy, which young women are still too often exposed to in school, to a feminist critical and liberatory pedagogy, goes a long way toward creating an empowering and respectful learning environment.

We found that the impact of increased self-awareness can be experienced on a personal level as well as on a collective level as in this example:

*Just realizing that I wasn't the only person to feel that way about myself, not the only one who had bad things going on in my life. At POWER Camp, there's a lot of trust, it's open, I could talk about myself, I was able to get a better perspective about myself, to see myself more clearly.*

The women's movement used consciousness-raising as a tool not only for women's empowerment and emancipation personally but also politically and in all other aspects of women's lives. POWER Camp draws on such experiences to give young women a chance to become

empowered and to come together to effect change in their communities. As an example of increased awareness which leads to action, one participant said "I was kind of aware of racism and things like that before but after POWER Camp, I am more aware of how to deal with them and what to do."

Almost every participant expressed that they had had a great time at POWER Camp, as in this example "I was able to try different things, it was fun." The element of fun is very important to the work that POWER Camp does with girls. Participants come to camp to enjoy themselves, not to sit around "learning" like they do in school. As the research findings suggest, the learning that takes place at POWER Camp is significant, however it occurs in a very non-traditional way using diverse approaches. The emphasis is placed on letting adolescent girls have a voice and providing them with opportunities to make choices.

## Conclusion

This study elucidates not only the question of whether POWER Camp as a program meets areas of need for/with young women, but also how to engage young women in community-based mutual-aid initiatives. *Collective Voices* illustrates the extent to which POWER Camp significantly ameliorates the lives of adolescent girls, and works toward the transformation of inequitable power relations in society.

To further reflect on the contribution that this study has had both in terms of its content and process, we must remember the overall objective of the study: to create a space for the voices of girls to be heard. The content of the feminist program evaluation demonstrates the overwhelmingly positive impact POWER Camp has on the lives of participants. The process of participatory evaluation that has taken place will have a lasting impact on POWER Camp organizationally, as it has successfully initiated a culture of evaluation within the organization. Furthermore, this feminist program evaluation contributes to a very limited body of literature grounded in feminist values and principles, and has practical relevance in the lives of adolescent girls and their communities. Overall, *Collective Voices* has been, and will continue to be, a project of inspiration.

*Stephanie Austin, is a POWER Camp co-founder, along with Willow Scobie and Tatiana Fraser. Committed to feminist action-oriented community research, Stephanie is presently working toward a Ph.D. in Psychology at York University. Stephanie is a young feminist activist who enjoys participating in the creation of spaces where equity can be truly felt.*

## References

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## LEA MURRAY-MACFADDEN

### the wound

I used to play with my friends  
then the childhood ended  
a hand touched me  
it was his  
I don't know what the problem is  
I tried to give the response  
but that little girl died at once  
I didn't want to obey  
but I wasn't strong enough to get away  
I pretended it wasn't happening  
it was a reoccurring thing  
time and time again  
I don't know where I was or when  
all I can see is him  
that hurt will never grow dim  
I got help—but time had passed  
I got help at last  
telling my family was no use  
they didn't believe I was abused  
they can all depart  
But I know the truth—the wounds in my heart

*Lea Murray-MacFadden's poetry appears earlier in this volume.*

## SPENCER DE CORNEILLE

### Temptation

Hold me; I'm sensitive,  
Don't feel like I belong.  
Whispers come like angry screams,  
Don't think I can stand this too long.

Touch me; I'm fragile,  
Dare to feel what's under the glass.  
Dare to realize what I'm made of:  
Softer than silk; harder than brass.

Use me; I'm gullible,  
Nothing concerns me.  
I use my brain to listen to your voice,  
But I use my heart to see.

Distract me; I'm determined,  
Nothing can throw me off track.  
A red target only to you,  
Go ahead and aim at my back.

Shock me; I'm petrified,  
Paralyzed, glued to the ground.  
No where to hide away from fear,  
Go ahead, make that vicious sound.

Abuse me; I'm a masochist,  
Break.  
Bend.  
Cut.  
Mend.

Tempt me. I won't budge.

*Spencer de Corneille is a 13-year-old Grade 7 student from the Linden School in Toronto. In addition to writing, she loves to draw portraits in pencil, and has a unique sense of style and creativity.*