Actionable Evidence Initiative Case Study

How Youth Participate in Building Evidence at Pace Center for Girls

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PROJECT
EVIDENT

The Actionable Evidence Initiative

Led by Project Evident with funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Actionable Evidence Initiative seeks to understand and remove barriers to building evidence that is equitable, useful, credible, and relevant for practitioners as they aim to improve the outcomes of students who are Black, Latino/a/x, or experiencing poverty. Please visit https://www.projectevident.org/actionable-evidence to learn more, join our network, and find partners interested in working together on actionable evidence solutions.

Actionable Evidence in Education Cases

This case is one in a series commissioned by the Actionable Evidence Initiative in 2020 and 2021. (Cases are published on the Project Evident website.) The series illustrates how researchers, evaluators, practitioners, funders, and policymakers across the country are exemplifying principles of the Actionable Evidence framework. It profiles a range of settings, actors, learning questions, methods, and products, unified by a commitment to practitioner-centered, timely, practical, equitable, and inclusive evidence building. Each case describes the origins, development, and results of a research or evaluation project, along with the authors' reflections on their experiences. Our hope is that these cases will provide both inspiration and practical guidance for those interested in generating and using evidence that leads to better and more equitable outcomes for youth and communities.

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Actionable Evidence in Education: How Youth Participate in Building Evidence at Pace Center for Girls

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Executive Summary

Founded in 1985 in Jacksonville, Florida, Pace Center for Girls (Pace) serves more than 3,000 at-risk girls (ages 11 to 18) annually in 23 communities in Florida and Georgia. Girls served by Pace are likely to have experienced risk factors associated with delinquency and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). Pace applies a set of gender-responsive, trauma-informed, and strength-based prevention and early intervention practices to enhance academic and social services, thus focusing on the intersection of socio-emotional health and education. These practices contribute to improvements in girls' self-efficacy and advocacy skills as well as their relationships with peers, family members, and adults in their communities.

This case study illustrates how Pace has adopted a Measurement-Evaluation-Learning (MEL) framework to support continuous quality improvements and produce equitable evidence. Pace blends utilization-focused and participatory evaluation with quality improvement methods to build actionable evidence. Key practices include:

- **Involving critical stakeholders** in research and evaluation to ask the right questions
- **Using participatory mixed methods** to foster evidence-based decision making
- **Adopting a systemic approach** to understand organizational performance and culture
- **Including different perspectives in analysis** to facilitate actionable findings
- Establishing strategies **supporting stakeholder participation** and use of information

Over the last several years, this approach has allowed Pace Center for Girls to shift from monitoring and compliance to understanding how the program has contributed to outcomes. The case study highlights the core practices of the MEL framework with examples. Challenges implementing the framework are also discussed.

The inclusion of program participants in MEL has positively affected organizational culture and social changes in the communities served. Program implementation results support the MEL framework; Pace has experienced measurable improvements in outcomes and in its agility to respond to participants' needs.

About the Project

Origins

Founded in 1985 in Jacksonville, Florida, [Pace Center for Girls](#) (Pace) serves more than 3,000 at-risk girls (ages 11 to 18) annually in 23 communities in Florida and Georgia. Girls served by Pace are likely to have experienced risk factors associated with delinquency and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). They may also live below the poverty level or have a family member with a history of incarceration. Most of the girls have been suspended or expelled from school at least once. In many cases, the girls' traumatic experiences have increased distrust in adults, institutions, and the systems that should support them.

At Pace, we understand that, for girls to change their lives, they and their families must have a voice in shaping their present and futures. Thus, to achieve our vision — creating a world where all girls and young women have power in a just and equitable society — we apply a set of gender-responsive, trauma-informed, and strength-based prevention and early intervention practices to enhance academic and social services. These practices contribute to improvements in girls' self-efficacy and advocacy skills as well as their relationships with peers, family members, and adults in their communities.

Who are the girls served by Pace?

- 3,000+ girls served each year
- 2 out of 4 experienced sexual, physical or emotional abuse
- 1 out of 5 was involved with the juvenile justice system
- 3 out of 4 were failing one or more classes
- 2 out of 5 had thoughts of suicide

Outcomes

- 4 out of 5 improve academically
- 9 out of 10 improve behavioral risk factors
- 9 out of 10 have no involvement with the juvenile justice system one year after completing Pace

Pace engages with communities through three distinct programs, each applying a participatory Measurement-Evaluation-Learning (MEL) (Bowman & Sweetman, 2014; Estrella et al. 2000) framework to generate evidence to guide services that change girls' life trajectories:

- The **Pace Center-based Day Program**, the original service delivery model, provides intensive academic advising, tutoring, and full-day middle school and high school instruction supported by individualized counseling, case management, therapy, family engagement, and community service learning. We have integrated diverse strategies (for example, surveys, town halls, and councils) to enhance participants' feedback opportunities in this program.

- **Pace Reach** offers supportive behavioral health therapy specifically designed for girls in middle and high school. This program relies on feedback from stakeholders (girls,

families, team members, and community partners) to tailor the delivery of wrap-around social services in various settings (schools, home, community locations).

- **Girls Coordinating Councils** (GCCs) are participatory spaces where networks of key community players use a data-driven approach to influence local policies and practices to mitigate and/or disrupt inequities affecting girls.

Today, we understand that, for Pace's services to fit into local systems of care effectively, we need to adopt participatory approaches and use 'real-time' data to generate insights about our programs. However, **it has taken us six years to intentionally transform into an organization that utilizes information from different stakeholders to support continuous improvement, innovation, and social impact.**

Pace Programs and Model

Girls Coordinating Councils
Sustained cross-sector community partnerships

Reach Program
Behavioral Health Services

Day Program
Academic and Social Services

Pace model
Trauma-informed | Strength-based | Gender-responsive
Values and Guiding Principles
Culturally Competent
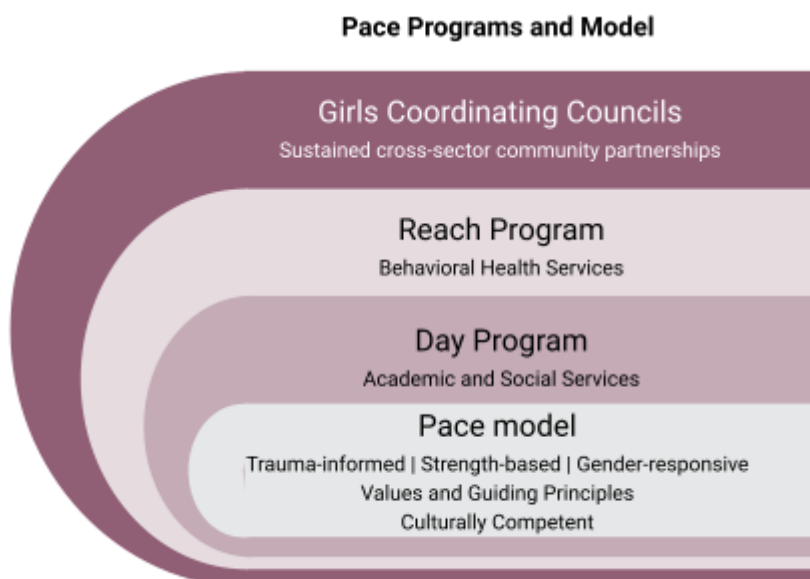
Before we began our transformation, Pace used data at the individual level to help girls identify their needs and strengths. At the organizational level, each department examined information through its own lens. However, information was not aggregated or analyzed to determine patterns, identify relationships, or ask questions about the programs' effectiveness. In addition, data were inconsistently gathered across Pace sites, and findings were not consistently shared with stakeholders. As a result, it wasn't easy to aggregate, analyze, and interpret girls' experiences with the program. Girls and families never had the chance to implement suggestions or provide feedback because we did not report back or include them in our initiatives to address the issues raised. Consequently, the information was not actionable.

Moreover, most of the information Pace gathered was related to program participation (outputs) rather than performance. Program participation data is essential for assessing our service capacity and accountability to external funders. For example, we needed to know how many girls were served and received the core components of our programs. However, we were missing the opportunity to ask more complex questions related to why specific outcomes were obtained or about the relationships among program services (for example, counseling or academic instruction), administrative systems (for example, recruitment or technology), and outcomes. We were also missing the opportunity to incorporate the voices of our participants to ensure organizational decisions were aligned with their realities. For instance, we were not

assessing how turnover among team members impacted girls' outcomes or how girls' interactions with team members affected their engagement in the program.

Our participatory MEL journey officially began in 2010 when Pace received support from the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation (EMCF) to develop a business plan to prepare for organizational growth. As a result, Pace brought in new leadership to help strengthen its human capital and technology infrastructure. EMCF also encouraged a thorough review of program data to understand the scope of what was needed for Pace to become more impact-driven and embrace learning for continuous improvement. As part of the process, Pace identified program codification as a critical goal and a requirement for expansion. Thus, there was a desire to focus on refining our theory of change and using it for program improvement. We also wanted to move from an exclusively compliance-driven approach to a culture of data-driven decision-making. It became clear that growing the organization required a structure to support delivering quality services, meet increased demands for reporting, and ensure accountability. Hence, in 2015, and with the support of EMCF, Pace began formally investing in building internal research and evaluation capacity. Efforts focused on three main areas:

1) **Technology:** developing support for data infrastructure (systems for collecting, managing, and analyzing information) to make certain that information was available for continuous improvement. This effort included switching to a Salesforce platform and acquiring statistical software to support data analysis.

2) **Human capital:** enhancing analytics capacity to ensure information was used to make decisions. This included hiring team members with the technical knowledge and skills to conduct analysis and develop reports supporting business strategies and processes. There was also intentionality in hiring team members who could implement participatory approaches to learning and who had strong communication and customer-focused skills.

3) **Culture:** cultivating an evidence culture by implementing a learning agenda that supports equitable services. It was necessary to link research and evaluation work explicitly to the mission of the organization. Pace's organizational culture also required strategies to support and sustain the inclusion of critical stakeholders through education and training on how to use data and on participatory approaches to building and using evidence.

Additionally, in 2016 Pace received support from the Fund for Shared Insight through participation in the Listen4Good (L4G) initiative to strengthen constituent feedback practices. Pace had previous experiences collecting satisfaction data and feedback from girls and families. However, data was not used to generate insights. To illustrate, a few Pace centers administered in-person surveys to participants a few weeks before they left the program, while others mailed the surveys after the girls left the program. In a few sites, surveys were received and read but not entered into the database. The L4G project was an opportunity to reset and strengthen girls' participation in research and evaluation by integrating a survey into existing

processes, which highlighted the value of feedback. Through L4G, we designed a method to consistently gather girls' and caregivers' feedback using participatory methods and bring the findings to leadership conversations. It also allowed Pace to begin building buy-in and trust for data analysis and feedback loops.[1] For example, L4G survey data facilitated in-depth discussions with center management and team members about the meaning of their findings and how they could be used to improve organizational culture.

Partners

Pace's MEL framework is supported by a participatory organizational culture that values partnerships and wraps around the needs of girls and young women. Girls, families, Pace team members, and community partners are part of a collective that uses information and/or provides resources to improve girls' lives, focusing on the intersection of socio-emotional health and education.

Pace engages **girls and their families** in activities and services that allow them, in developmentally appropriate ways, to learn about and tackle challenges impacting their lives and communities. While at Pace, girls and families engage in surveys, interviews, focus groups, town halls, and councils that provide opportunities for self-advocacy. Girls also provide input about our data collection methods. Their experiences and insights help us learn about what works and what could be improved in implementing our programs and identify the local, state, and federal policies and practices that might need reform.

Pace also values **team members** as critical partners. With our workforce of approximately 500 people, reflecting the diversity of the communities we serve, we create opportunities to examine data, provide insights, and act upon discoveries. Team members' feedback acts as a catalyst to grant power and ownership over challenges impacting the implementation and effectiveness of our programs. Pace team members are also encouraged to collaborate in community initiatives that strengthen girls' local care systems. These opportunities improve employees' understanding of how their actions directly impact the girls' success and promote feelings of connection with our mission.

The **Program Information and Impacts team,** led by the author**,** is an essential partner for the implementation of the MEL framework. This team is responsible for supporting internal research and participatory evaluation at Pace. They assist with the collection, storage, and use of information, addressing questions about the organization's strategies and processes. They also engage with critical stakeholders by offering training and education about how to use data to inform decisions and about including participatory approaches in research and evaluation.

Community partners are also critical to Pace's work. We partner with local funders like the Children's Services Council of Broward County and local organizations to develop networks to enhance coordination of services responding to the needs of girls and young women. We are also supported by government agencies like the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice and use

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[1] A feedback loop is a two-way stream of communication between a program or service and its stakeholders.

its data to inform our community services. Nationally, we engage with funders like the Fund for Shared Insight and think tanks like Feedback Labs and receive technical assistance and resources to amplify the voices of our constituents. These community partnerships create spaces influencing multiple layers of systems impacting the lives of the girls we serve. We acknowledge that girls' experiences are nested in factors associated with their communities' socioeconomic status, education, employment, and social support networks (Hagel et al., 2018; Viner et al., 2012). Therefore, Pace can only effectively implement its program and social impact by including others involved in the care system.

Approach

The primary goal of the Pace MEL framework is to support continuous quality improvement and produce equitable evidence by incorporating critical stakeholders' perspectives and blending result-focused methodologies (Marx et al., 2021 & Benitez et al., 2021). Therefore, we adopted utilization-focused (Patton, 2008) and participatory (Luesse & Sabo, 2021) evaluation approaches to go beyond documenting girls' voices. We involve our girls, families, and community partners as consultants and collaborators in data-driven processes to support system of care changes. This allows Pace to be responsive to issues relevant to the program (e.g., positive teacher relationships) and the community (e.g., failure to appear in court) instead of relying only on traditional measures (e.g., standardized test scores).

Through our experience implementing a participatory MEL framework, we have grasped that certain practices nurture inclusiveness and contribute to actionable findings. Our key practices include:

- Involving critical stakeholders in research and evaluation to ask the right questions
- Using participatory mixed methods to foster evidence-based decision making
- Adopting a systemic approach to understand organizational performance and culture
- Including different perspectives in analysis to facilitate actionable findings
- Establishing strategies supporting stakeholder participation and use of information

Below, we offer more detail about Pace's experiences with these practices, along with examples of how they are applied within our organization.

MEL Practice: Involving critical stakeholders in research and evaluation to ask the right questions
Pace creates meaningful opportunities for inclusion during the research and evaluation process by involving those affected by the program in identifying and prioritizing the issues we seek to address. We work with girls, families, and communities to engage in processes where data is examined to provide context and identify questions addressing girls' and young women's healthy development. This exercise enhances Pace's trust relationships with stakeholders and knowledge about the communities we serve. It also contributes to maximizing stakeholders' conscientization[2] or deep awareness of their social reality and strengthening their data capacity.

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[2] According to Paulo Freire (1970), conscientization is the process of deep awareness of an individual's social reality through conversations, actions, and solutions impacting his/her/their system.

Practice in Action

Pace's Girls Coordinating Council (GCC) in Broward County took part in The Second Chance Project, a group composed of girls and adults conducting a participatory action research project.[3] The group examined data associated with juvenile justice in Broward County (i.e., community and school arrests, offenses, and detention rates). Questions reflecting the girls' interests were used to guide the group's data explorations and learning. The group learned that arrest for failure to appear in court (FTA) was a problem in their community and decided to examine its causes and make recommendations to mitigate it. In addition to reviewing existing data, the girls developed protocols and interviewed court officials as well as youth who experienced detention for FTA. The Second Chance project made evidence actionable by relying on knowledge produced by the individuals affected by the issue. The group developed recommendations for judges based on their analysis; the girls also championed youth-friendly solutions like an animated video focused on the experience of a girl detained for failing to appear in court and a pocket-sized booklet with information about the court process and key phone numbers. They also advocated for the availability of information in the languages spoken in the community, adding cultural competency to the project. As a result, we have witnessed a reduction in the number of young people detained for failure to appear in Broward County.[4]

MEL Practice: Using participatory mixed methods to foster evidence-based decision making
To foster evidence-based decision-making, we have strengthened our data collection protocols to include quantitative and qualitative methods highlighting stakeholders' perspectives. Quantitative data are analyzed using various statistical techniques (for example, t-tests and regression models) to learn about the implementation of our core model, best practices, and outcomes. Additionally, girls, families, team members, and community partners participate in interviews, surveys, and focus groups where we capture their experiences qualitatively.

Practice in Action

Pace applied a mixed-method approach to examine healthy relationships with team members as a program outcome. Based on our theory of change and existing research, we know that connectedness is an essential protective factor for youth that can reduce the likelihood of various health risk behaviors (Steiner et al., 2019). We gathered quantitative data from girls using surveys asking about relationships with team members and adults in their communities. We embedded participant engagement in the process by including the girls in the process of vetting the questions included in the survey; they provided input about appropriateness, clarity, and relevance. We also collected qualitative data and asked girls how relationships with Pace team members helped them achieve their goals. Their insights highlighted the role of Pace Center

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[3] Participatory action research is an approach to scientific inquiry and social change grounded in the principles of equity that engages people in identifying problems relevant to their own lives, conducting research to understand the problem and advocating for changes based on research evidence.
[4] The numbers of youth arrested for failure to appear (FTA) are published by the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice. The most recent report available during the production of this manuscript is DRAI SR-Report July-December-2020.

teachers in developing trusting relationships with girls. Survey responses about girl-teacher relationships, girls' academic records, and team member retention information were used to explore the effect of these relationships. Correlations and regression models were applied using a cross-sectional approach examining the strength in teacher-girl relationships and its impact on variables such as academic improvement and teacher retention. By doing this, we identified a positive relationship between Pace centers with low teacher turnover and high proportions of girls who improved academically and confirmed the relationship between teacher turnover and girls' academic improvement.

This analysis elevated teachers' relationships as an essential program factor and highlighted the need for a teacher retention strategy. The strategy included investment in training for teachers about healthy relationships with girls. For example, teachers received training in ways to support girls' positive classroom behaviors and communicate clear expectations to strengthen their relationships with girls. A program support team was created to help teachers sustain these practices through coaching. In addition, many teachers were leaving Pace because the year-round model did not offer the benefit of summer break. To align with teachers' experiences in the public school system, Pace added a new benefit, allowing teachers to schedule a month's break every year. After the implementation of these strategies, Pace experienced increases in its teacher retention rate.[5]

MEL Practice: Adopting a systemic approach to understand organizational performance and culture

A single perspective does not provide a complete picture of what happens at an organization. Thus, Pace's MEL framework seeks to capture patterns and relationships between participants' information and other functions in our organization by applying a systems approach to ensure alignment between our work processes and culture. For research and evaluation, we apply a systems approach by combining data from various sources. This practice allows us to make connections between departments and maximize the use of resources for inter-department initiatives supporting the development of a healthy organizational culture.

Practice in Action

We have combined girls' feedback with feedback from team members about their own satisfaction. Specifically, we found a positive relationship between the girls' Net Promoter Scores[6] (NPS) and results from the Gallup Q12 Employee Engagement Survey.[7] In centers where team members are highly engaged and feel they have an opportunity to do what they do best every day, girls were more likely to have higher NPS scores. These findings were shared with team members and girls to gather insights and inform core program initiatives.

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[5] Increase in teacher retention was observed after strategies implementation before the COVID-19 pandemic.
[6] In the for-profit sector, the NPS measures the brand awareness and level of loyalty of a consumer. At Pace, we are using the NPS as a tool to gauge satisfaction and engagement with the program. For more information about the NPS, please refer to resources developed by Bain and Company or SurveyMonkey.
[7] This is a widely used instrument to assess employee satisfaction.

As a result, Pace redesigned its behavior modification system to include behaviors related to girls' feelings of belonging to a Pace center, team member relationships, and a sense of safety. Our Organizational Development Department also implemented professional development initiatives focused on increasing teamwork, social cohesiveness, and providing employees with opportunities to showcase best practices. We reviewed these results in the context of each community to understand how site-specific factors may be affecting girls' feelings of belonging and team members' sense of efficacy and developed action plans based on these findings.

MEL Practice: Including different perspectives in analysis to facilitate actionable findings

Pace believes that including different perspectives when discussing findings expands our insights and improves validity. Evidence that reflects the perspectives of those closer to the issues we want to learn about facilitates interpretation and improves opportunities for action (Zeller-Berkman, Muñoz-Proto, & Torre, 2016). Thus, research and evaluation findings are shared and discussed with team members and girls. From team members' perspectives, we get to address workflows, processes, or organizational policies affecting the delivery of services. From girls' and families' perspectives, we learn how effective our services are and the pain points in their implementation, and we offer an opportunity for empowerment.

Practice in Action

Through our feedback survey, we learned about the issue of wait time between the request to see a counselor and having access to a counselor. Specifically, girls mentioned the use of the 'May I Speak to You' box, in which girls submit a written request to see a counselor. From girls' perspective, they felt it took a while for counselors to receive the request and, on some occasions, they were seeing their counselor the day after a request was submitted.

Discussion of this finding helped team members understand the need to modify the process and check the box more often to ensure quick responses.

Feedback from the girls and team members was used to modify the information collected in the 'May I Speak to You' card. Specifically, we added request categories and an open-ended section where the girl can explain the reason for the request to help counselors discern the urgency of the request. We also provided the girls with information about situations that might impede an immediate response (for example, the assigned counselor being sick or attending training outside the Pace Center). In addition, girls advocating for more time with their counselors translated into ensuring the availability of at least one counselor to respond to immediate needs. Pace girls felt valued and heard when they witnessed the changes made to the 'May I Speak to You' box process. A Pace girl shared about the experience of giving feedback, "Adults ask me for advice on stuff that is going on in the center; they want to know what I think. This makes me feel included and important."

MEL Practice: Establishing strategies supporting stakeholder participation and use of information

At Pace, we create strategies to encourage and sustain participation in research and evaluation. Specifically, we rely on formal councils or temporary task forces to formalize participatory structures supporting knowledge generation and co-learning among stakeholders. These structures usually include a diversity of stakeholders. For example, the Pace Girls Leadership Council (GLC) is currently a conduit for feedback and engagement of girls in action research projects addressing Pace services issues. GLC projects offer the chance for critical reflection and problem solving around issues affecting girls through project planning, data collection, analysis, and use of findings. They also provide opportunities for girls and adults to team up and develop skills nurturing healthy adult-youth relationships. Girls Coordinating Councils (GCCs) are another formal space where community stakeholders convene to examine data and identify strategies to improve conditions for girls and young women. Each GCC develops a 'Turn the Curve'[8] report that serves as a blueprint to plan and guide community actions. Moreover, Pace employs temporary task forces focused on specific issues where team members use data or gather further information (through surveys, interviews, and focus groups) to enhance understanding of work processes and propose solutions.

Practice in Action

One project recently undertaken by the GLC focused on understanding what makes girls feel respected by Pace team members. During a discussion of the girls' feedback survey results, the GLC representatives compared the proportions of girls who felt respected, felt safe, and felt a sense of belonging at Pace. The girls were surprised to learn that the proportion of girls who reported feeling respected by Pace team members was lower than the proportion who felt safe or a sense of belonging. Overall, 80% or more felt safe or a sense of belonging at Pace, while 1/3 of the girls did not feel respected by Pace team members. The Pace GLC representatives couldn't relate to the finding and expressed that it did not represent their experience. Instead of dismissing this result, the GLC wanted to understand why their peers did not feel respected. They

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[8] A Turn the Curve report includes the best actions to take to improve on the forecasted trend for the baseline indicators examined. For more information about the Turn the Curve report, please refer to Clear Impact.

were also motivated to explore respect by the desire to create a positive and caring culture at their Pace Centers. The GLC representatives spent time sharing their insights about their relationships with team members. They used this information to identify questions for their peers and create a protocol to guide focus groups. The girls also had opportunities to learn and practice group facilitation skills. The team liaisons supported the girls in coordinating focus group logistics, note-taking, and positive encouragement. A total of 13 GLC representative-led focus groups were conducted with the participation of 59 Pace girls. Through this exercise, we learned that team member behavior considered respectful is defined by:

- **Showing caring behaviors with actions**: "The Pace staff member redirects me in a positive way if she knows that I am having a bad day."
- **Acknowledging girls' voices and opinions**: "The staff member respects my opinions during peer mediations instead of jumping to conclusions and making assumptions."
- **Showing empathy**: "They helped me through a time when there was a death of someone important to me. I cried and they supported me."

GLC discussed the results of the focus groups and shared recommendations with Pace's leadership. Currently, Pace staff are in the process of incorporating girls' suggestions into our program. A few of the suggestions highlighted include: listen to girls' concerns, help adults understand what it means to be a teenager, make adults available to support and follow up on girls' issues, and establish clear boundaries and expectations between team members and girls. Making these suggestions actionable is critical to developing girls that feel empowered to share their opinions. As one of our team members shared, "Girls were very clear that they would like to see these changes happen in order to feel more respected."

Resources

Pace leadership has invested considerable time and effort in developing a culture that values decisions based on evidence, uses 'real-time' data to inform services and address participants' needs and strengths, and includes multiple stakeholders. These investments have been intentional in supporting the human capital and technical infrastructure needed to listen, learn, and improve the work with girls and communities.

Hiring criteria: During the hiring process, Pace looks for candidates whose competencies align with a culture that can support a participatory MEL framework. We seek people who are customer-focused and team-oriented. Job descriptions for positions directly supporting the MEL framework also describe components of participatory research projects.

Dedicated internal evaluation capacity: As noted above, Pace has dedicated staff to support research and evaluation. Currently, the internal evaluation unit includes three data system administrators and two analysts.

Professional development: Pace has also created internal mechanisms to reinforce a participatory culture. A learning and development unit was created to support team members with the development of skills promoting participation and use of data.

Technology and infrastructure: Pace has been intentional in building an infrastructure to support the work. We have expanded technology efforts to improve connectivity across our sites and improved capacity for telecommunications with team members, girls, and families. Pace has also tailored a customer relationship management system that takes advantage of the Salesforce platform and the Exponent Case Management application to maximize the use of data.

Funding: Pace received funding from the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation (EMCF) and the Fund for Shared Insight to support evidence building. From 2013 to 2019, EMCF infused $5.5 million in Pace; this supported data-driven practices, including the development of business plans, job positions in research and evaluation, and a randomized controlled trial (RCT) of Pace's impact.[9] These activities contributed to the development of the current MEL framework. The Fund for Shared Insight also partnered with EMCF from 2016 to 2018 and granted Pace a $60,000 Listen4Good grant to create a system to listen to program participants. Currently, 11% of Pace National Office's management and general expense budget is dedicated to internal research and evaluation. This budget supports five full-time positions, 500 Salesforce licenses, and analytics software.

Challenges and Responses

Pace has experienced the challenge of balancing accountability to external funders with learning for continuous improvement. Some team members believe that research and evaluation should only respond to funders' requests, and any additional activity represents a burden. In response to this perception, we engaged in diverse communication strategies explaining the benefits of using research and evaluation to support our mission. For example, we communicate how, through participatory research projects, we offer opportunities for our girls to learn how to voice opinions, problem solve, and develop self-efficacy skills and for team members to learn how to improve their services. These communications are consistent in message and delivered through diverse channels (for example, leadership meetings, town halls, and audience-focused editorials). Recently, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we asked our programs to survey their girls and families to ensure continued services. This activity was not a funder requirement, but our organization thought it was needed to support our girls and families during the pandemic. A few team members voiced feeling overwhelmed with the added responsibility. As a response, we applied change management techniques and purposeful communication. We explained that it was critical to directly hear from families and girls about their needs during the pandemic. Pace leaders engaged in weekly communications supporting data collection to ensure it was not perceived as a burden to team members. Moreover, the purpose of the survey was directly linked to the benefits our girls would receive.

Another hurdle is the technical knowledge required for the implementation of research and evaluation methodologies. We have observed anxiety and confusion during conversations about evaluation, perhaps because stakeholders feel they are being asked to be social scientists but

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[9] For more on external studies of Pace during this period, see Millenky et al., 2019; Millenky and Hossain, 2019; and Treskon, Millenky, & Freedman, 2017.

do not want to be or do not feel prepared to be. Specifically, managers new to Pace or with less experience tend to wrestle or feel uncomfortable with the data collection activities, interpretation of statistical analysis, or engaging in dialogue about findings. Also, GLC representatives engaging in research activities sometimes feel unprepared to respond to the requirements of participatory action research. For example, they may not know how to develop a research question, read charts, or facilitate a focus group. Our response to this challenge is to embed training and education on fundamental knowledge and skills to participate in research and evaluation activities. We believe our team members, girls, families, and community partners can learn and tackle research and evaluation if they are provided the appropriate scaffolding to engage in these activities (Higa & Brandon, 2008; Sabo, 2003). To illustrate, to support our GLC projects, we develop lesson plans that introduce research and evaluation concepts like charts, interviews, and focus groups and offer practice opportunities. This method allows us to scaffold the experience for each girl within the requirements of the general project and prepare adults to assume a role in participatory projects.

Pace GLC Project Outline

Session	Purpose
Introduction and expectations for GLC liaisons	GLC liaisons are introduced to the purpose and content of the participatory action research project. Expectations about GLC statewide support and level of participation are explained.
Introduction and expectations for GLC representatives	GLC statewide representatives are introduced to the project. Team building activity around Pace values and guiding principles is used to set expectations and promote team building. Skills: team building
Project context, issue identification, research questions	Pace team members share information about a topic with GLC representatives. GLC representatives discuss the information provided, ask questions, and begin identifying possible research questions for the project. Skills: presentation, public speaking, research questions
Research questions	GLC representatives discuss what they know about the issue and what they would like to learn about it. They engage in small group discussions and brainstorm activities to identify research questions. Skills: Public speaking, developing research questions
Research methods	Research methods are introduced. GLC representatives have the opportunity to experience an interview, a survey, and a focus group. They select a research method and start developing questions and protocols. Data collection practices associated with the selected method are also introduced.
Data analysis	The concept of data analysis is introduced. GLC representatives practice how to interpret data with everyday life information. The following questions are used to help with data interpretation: *What do you notice? What do you wonder? What can you infer? What's the deeper story?*
Data analysis	GLC representatives analyze the data collected. The questions introduced above are used to help with data interpretation: *What do you notice? What do you wonder? What can you infer? What's the deeper story?*

Findings dissemination	GLC representatives identify and develop a strategy to disseminate the results and findings. The concepts of an audience and advocacy for change are introduced.

Lastly, the impact of youth participation can be limited or enhanced by the roles adults assume in these projects (Breibart & Kepes, 2007; Camino, 2005; Krenichyn et al., 2007). For example, we had experiences where team members perceived our girls as incapable of engaging in research and evaluation activities. In our GLC, we have also observed that the hierarchy of the relationship between team members and program participants has sometimes inhibited opportunities for girls to express their voices. Consequently, it is critical to provide adults with the tools to challenge possible misconceptions about youth and imbalances in power. At Pace, we shifted the paradigm from perceiving girls as problematic to positioning them as assets in their communities. We provide team members with information, training, and protocols encouraging effective youth-adult partnerships using a strength-based model. We created a set of principles that are introduced and discussed with adults and girls with the intent to equalize power and support equitable partnerships. These resources help adults be self-aware about personal biases and promote a deeper understanding of the community, facilitating cultural competency in our activities.

Pace Participatory Project Principles

- Girls are our partners and we can learn from them
- Girls are experts who generate valid knowledge about their experiences
- Girls and adults share authority, power and decision making but without forgetting personal boundaries
- Girls and adults have strengths to contribute
- Adults create a friendly and safe environment where girls do not feel intimidated
- Adults show girls we are interested in what they have to say
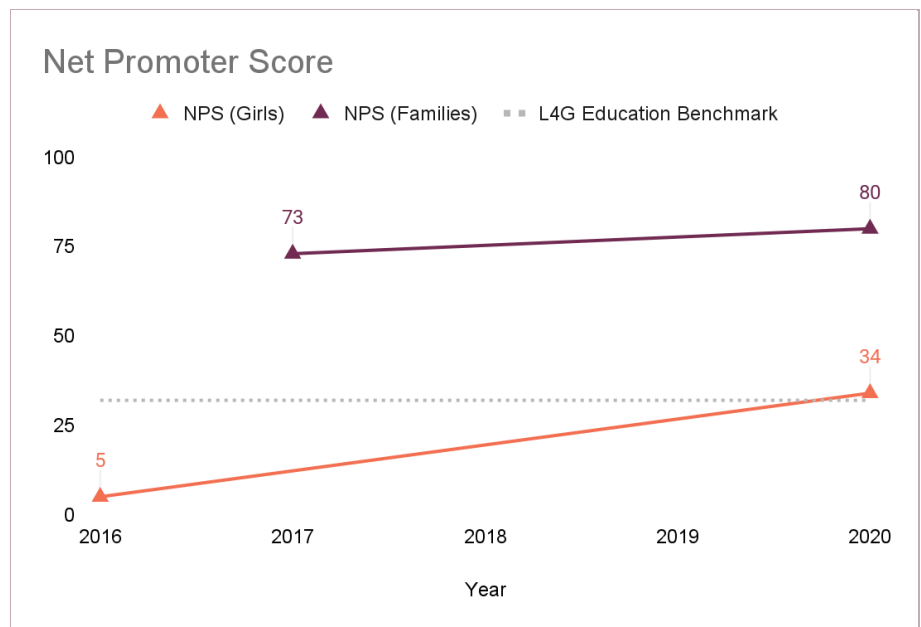- Adults are patient
- Respect goes both ways

Results

Implementing a participatory MEL framework has provided the Pace team with rich, relevant, and timely evidence. The changes we have made to our programs based on this evidence have led to meaningful increases in stakeholder satisfaction. During the last five years, we have experienced an increase of 31 points in our Net Promoter Score from girls (2016=5; 2020=34) and seven points with families (2017=73; 2020=80), locating us above the benchmark

established by education organizations participating in the L4G initiative.[10] Also, our program retention rate increased from 76% in 2016 to 91% in 2021. **Our shift toward a participatory MEL framework has supported developing a responsive culture for girls, situating them at the center of all our efforts.**

An unintended result of our participatory culture is the agility it has provided during the COVID-19 pandemic. We asked our girls and families *what can we do for you?* and *what are your challenges?* and adjusted our service delivery model based on their input. We conducted surveys and town halls with families to understand their challenges and what services were needed. We used this information to create new ways or modify existing ways of providing counseling and academic services. During the COVID-19 lockdown months (March-September 2020), we still engaged more than 90% of our girls in services every week. Access to services also facilitated increases in academic performance. Compared with the previous year, high school girls saw a 12% increase in credits earned and middle school girls experienced a 46% increase in grade improvement. When it was time to go back to school, we listened and learned from our girls and families about how the remote environment affected service delivery perception, the girls' engagement, and alignment with our culture. For example, while some girls were thriving with remote services, we learned that others struggled and needed additional support. We applied this learning to our reopening plans to provide options and appropriate services to our families.

Net Promoter Score

▲ NPS (Girls) ▲ NPS (Families) ▪▪ L4G Education Benchmark

- 73 (2017, Families)
- 80 (2020, Families)
- 5 (2016, Girls)
- 34 (2020, Girls)

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[10] The Listen4Good benchmark for education organizations is 32.

Alignment with Actionable Evidence Principles

Principle	In This Case...
Centers on Community Needs and Voices *Addresses the context, perspectives, priorities and assets of students and families, along with the challenges they face*	• Research and evaluation activities include girls, families, and community partners. Stakeholders provide input on the evaluation agenda, collaborate on data collection efforts, and participate in discussions of evaluation findings. • Within Pace, the paradigm shifted from perceiving girls as problematic to positioning them as assets in their communities.
Prioritizes Practitioner Learning and Decision-making *Answers questions that are highly relevant to policy and practice, and that help practitioners prioritize decisions in service of students and families*	• Team members have opportunities to understand and reflect on the experiences of girls and families and use these insights to support quality services. • Protocols, guidelines, and processes are integrated into day-to-day activities to ensure that data are usable and gathered in a participatory manner.
Enables Timely Improvements *Allows practitioners to make evidence-informed decisions in a timely manner*	• The internal evaluator works with decision makers to identify when data needs are critical to a program, engages in conversations with the program, and identifies key data points and times for reporting. • Discussion of findings leads to recommendations and solutions that strengthen organizational initiatives.
Credible and Transparent *Uses high-quality data and analysis, aligning methods with practitioner questions, timeline and context*	• Including different perspectives in our research and evaluation efforts improves validity and produces evidence reflecting the perspectives of those closest to the issues we want to learn about. • Mixed methods of evaluation are used to enhance the credibility and interpretation of findings. • Data sources are combined to expand understanding of culture and mission implementation.
Responsive to Operational Context of Practitioners *Reflects the context in which practitioners operate, including organizational settings, relationships and resources, and political and policy environment*	• Practitioner input is solicited throughout the process, resulting in evaluation designs that are aligned with program context. • The evaluation team engages key stakeholder groups at critical points. • Projects include opportunities for self-reflection to address cultural competency and power relationships between girls and adults.

Accessible and User-Centered *Clearly communicates research design, analysis, and findings to facilitate practitioner understanding and use*	● Pace's MEL framework intentionally applies a blend of participatory result-focused methodologies to inform continuous quality improvement, promote growth informed by measurable outcomes, and support organizational learning. It is embedded in the organization's culture. ● Sharing findings and seeking interpretations from team members, our girls, and community partners facilitates uncovering key issues and root causes in the communities where we live and work.
Builds Practitioner Capacity for R&D *Provides practitioners with data, products, tools and trainings to own and advance their evidence agenda*	● Formal strategies like councils are implemented to provide spaces for discussion of evidence needs and evaluation findings ● Education and training are incorporated into research and evaluation activities to scaffold the meaningful participation of girls and staff in varied roles.
Attends to Systemic and Structural Conditions *Considers systems, policies, practices, cultural norms, and community conditions that drive inequity, including those related to poverty and racism*	● The act of creating participatory spaces nourishes trusting relationships that provide opportunities for learning about the opinions, emotions, and fears around structural racism that are prevalent in the communities we serve.

Reflections and Conclusion

Pace's MEL approach offers opportunities to understand and reflect on the experiences of our girls and families. We use these insights to support quality services and our communities' systems of care. Sharing findings and seeking interpretations from our team members, girls, families, and community partners facilitates uncovering key issues and root causes in the places where we live and work. As part of a data-driven approach, we align quantitative community indicators with girls' stories. Also, we have witnessed how creating spaces for open discussions and reflections among different stakeholders fosters action. Leadership also becomes invested in the work because they see the connection between the data and its implications for quality programming. Girls are empowered by witnessing how their opinions are heard and used to inform solutions. Thus, an effective participatory learning approach to research and evaluation should include the stakeholders who are closely connected to an organization in order to produce the most valid results (e.g., based on the right research questions, more likely to be put to appropriate uses), and expertise in evaluation to ensure that the suitable methods are used and that results are interpreted correctly and fairly — that the results are valid.

To reap the benefits of a participatory learning approach to research and evaluation, creating a broader scale strategy in the education and nonprofit field is crucial. Training a diverse and

capable pool of researchers and evaluators capable of implementing participatory research projects is vital for the sustainability of the approach. For example, the Children's Services Council of Broward County invested in team building and workshops addressing participatory research concepts in the Second Chance Project. Girls and adults spent three days together engaging in team-building exercises and learning how to work together.

Moreover, we need support from visionary private and public funders willing to create financial and policy mechanisms to balance learning and accountability. The majority of the funding available for program evaluation is geared toward ensuring accountability and does not offer enough flexibility to support learning or the inclusion of diverse perspectives. Internal evaluators play a crucial role in reporting and monitoring activities, but their role should not be limited to accountability activities. By bringing monitoring and reporting issues to decision-makers' attention and by applying participatory approaches, internal researchers and evaluators can influence conversations related to why specific changes can lead to more equitable and effective programs.

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K-12 | implementation support | program improvement | surveys | focus groups | administrative data | gender-responsive | participatory research | nonprofit service provider | foundation | internal evaluator | academic learning outcomes | social emotional outcomes | program retention