

A research report on gender and classroom interaction



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Through an in-class survey, information was gathered to explore the differences of classroom interactions between males and females, particularly in a Social Science classroom setting. Through this research, the results supported a hypothesis about males' dominant role in the classroom's interface. Males' learning was found to be less negatively affected by the class size; they were to a lesser extent affected by the way the teacher interacts with his/her students especially in the older group. Males were generally more open to choose varying lesson delivery methodologies. This information plays a significant role when it comes to shaping the Social Science classrooms. Teachers should keep in mind the differences between the genders in terms of classroom dynamics and make sure to avoid gender bias that might place females at a disadvantage.

" Gender is the division of people into two categories, " men" and " women" (Borgatta, E. F. and Montgomery, R. J. V, 2000, p. 1057). It is widely believed that gender affects a student's learning experience in the classroom. Most people tend to consider that males and females do not gain the same experience in today's educational systems. The interaction that goes on in the classroom plays a role in the student understanding of the schooling process. A gender role is a " theoretical construct in the social sciences and humanities that refers to a set of social and behavioral norms that, within a specific culture, are widely considered to be socially appropriate for individuals of a specific sex" (Maccoby, 1966). So, for my field research, I proposed to explore the following two theories: gender and gender roles affect the classroom interaction particularly in high schools' Social Science classrooms and whether or not males dominate the classroom dynamics. Sex

roles and the classroom interface in the Social Science classrooms are important issues to study because school plays a crucial role in the socialization of teens because it ultimately impacts their role in the overall society. So, by exploring how gender influences student learning, the teacher is able to keep in mind these differences, accommodate this into their lessons, and make gender equity a reality in their classrooms. The literature in this field supports this premise: “ experience suggests boys and girls learn differently, and research verifies it” (McTaggart, 2009). In my field study, I used Christine Howe’s research review on “ Gender and Classroom Interaction” as a scholarly source to find out more about how gender influences the classroom’s learning experience. Peer reviewed journals are also embedded within this study to show that friction between genders does exist in the classroom setting.

According to Howe, “ considerable evidence shows that gender differences do exist in classroom interaction”(p. 5). In the overall whole-class interaction, males contribute more than females and are given more feedback from the teachers. Therefore, this may impact the student’s

self-reliance and the strategies they utilize in their overall learning (p. 8). It should be noted, however, that the teacher does play a role in the gender difference that may exist:

Good educators understand the diversity that exists among girls and among

Boys, and they also have an awareness of gender-specific commonalities

that influence learning (McTaggart, p. 18).

According to Howe, many studies show that greater amount of negative feedback are given to males versus females (p. 12). However, some researchers in the field go against this premise:

The argument is that there's something wrong with the women, whereas when the boys or men lag behind, it is because the educational system is failing to engage them. For girls, the usual proposal is to fix them with the implication that such a fix is probably unattainable; for boys, it is to fix the system, or at least provide them with the opportunity to play football (Pennington, p. 3).

So, the methodologies initiated by the teacher in the classroom may have an impact on these differences. In fact, these differences,

do not limit what either sex can achieve; he does contend they play a valuable role in determining the most effective methods for teaching, disciplining and understanding children and young adults (Sax, p. 10).

The purpose of my field research was to try to find out the best way to achieve gender equity in student's classroom involvement in order to improve the learning experience in the social science's division. So, in order for me to find out more about this issue, I planned to make my research take on a student centred approach. This was done in order to get the students as much involved in my research as possible.

Description of the Research Plan.

In order to gather the required information for my study, the technique that I utilized was an in-class survey. The reason behind my plan was to get the different genders' perspectives in their own learning experiences. So, what I did was make a survey of ten questions and gave the students ten minutes at the end of class to fill it in. Also, during lunch break, I went to the student's cafeteria, introduced myself as a student teacher from York University, and asked random students if they have taken social sciences classes such as world religions, politics,

economics fashion, history, law, nutrition, human growth, parenting, sociology, world issues, or geography. If they said " yes" to any of these courses, I asked them if they would be interested in participating in a survey. The survey was laid out as follows:

Social Science and Humanities Survey

Please circle one from each of the following:

* Your gender: Male-Female

* Age: 15-16

1. Does the number of students in your Social Science classes affect your learning experience? Explain.
2. On a scale from 0-10 (minimal participation-active participation)

How likely are you to raise your hand and participate in class? If:

- a. the teacher's gender is opposite of yours
 - b. your group of friends are present in class
 - c. the classroom environment is welcoming (i. e. not intimidating)
3. In your opinion, does the way the teacher interacts with his/her students affect the level of participation in class? Explain.
4. What do you like to do in your spare time? (i. e. Hobbies, interests, etc.)
5. Do you enjoy reading for fun? If yes, what kind of books do you read?
6. From the following methods, Circle the method that you enjoy the most in terms of lesson delivery and give reason for your choice:
- a. Lecture
 - b. Question and Answer
 - c. Class discussion
 - d. Oral brainstorming
7. What type of learner are you?
- a. Visual
 - b. Audio
 - c. Hands-on

8. When working on an assignment, would you rather work individually, with a partner, or in a group?

9. Give a specific example of what a teacher in the social sciences department can do to make their lessons more appealing to you.

10. What types of resources would give you a better understanding of the Social Sciences curriculum and strike your interest? (I. e. Videos, PowerPoint Presentations, Worksheets, etc.)

*Please note that sufficient space was placed between each question for the students to write.

Observations

When looking at whether or not the size of the classroom impacts the learning process of students, overall, the different genders had various points of view depending on their age groups. At fifteen years of age, females more readily agreed that the number of students in the social science classrooms impacts learning. When asked about the classroom's size and its influence on education, one fifteen years old female stated that the amount of pupils "sometimes" affects learning and said that: "Sometimes, because it is harder to be recognized by the teacher if they have a larger class". Sixteen year old males, however, had the greater consent on the effect that the number of students plays on the schooling process. One student remarked: "Yes because then I have less 1 on 1 time with the teacher". In the case where the students did not fit into either neither the fifteen nor the sixteen year of age categories, there were an equal number

of students in both sex divisions that either agreed or disagreed that the amount of students in the class acts upon the quality of learning that takes place. Thus, females believed that there is an influence and this was made clear through the following statement: “ Yes, I prefer smaller classrooms since I can focus better when less people are in a class”. Males, however, believe the contrary and one student reasoned that the number of students does not affect their learning: “ No, because I’m independent”. The tables in addendum 1 show a visual representation of the results collected.

Teacher’s interaction with his/her students was also examined in my study. It was found that, in general, both genders agreed that participation in class was impacted by the teacher’s relations with the students:

Educators have long assumed gender gaps in achievement would be eradicated if boys and girls were taught the same subjects in the same way at the same time. They were wrong (McTaggart, 17).

Females, in fact, regardless of age all consented that the way the teacher interrelate with their students affected the level of participation. This was stated clearly by one fifteen years old who remarked: “...if your teacher is more calm and relaxed and makes the class more fun & educational at the same time, it motivates us and makes us participate”. This observation is also affirmed through the literature review:

Results indicated that students with a more positive perception of school personnel also reported a greater sense of school membership. Male students

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and older students had a more negative perception of administrators relative to female and younger students (Smith-Doerr, p. 11).

Agreement between the sexes in regards to the level of participation and the teacher's interaction was seen most evidently at the youngest age group of fifteen years old. One male student in that group stated: ". if the teacher seems kind then I would be less intimidated to participate". Therefore, it can be easily concluded from these data that the style in which the teacher interacts with the students definitely influences the level of participation in class. Campbell's research on gender equity for Science teachers affirms this belief:

Teachers knowingly or not, influence how girls view science...girls receive less teacher attention; that textbooks and other educational materials are gender-biased; and the result is that girls have little self-confidence in their abilities in mathematics, science, and technology (Campbell, p. 6).

Lesson delivery methodologies preferences were also examined. Students were asked to choose the method that they enjoy the most in terms of lesson delivery. As shown in the table in addendum 1, male students at the age of fifteen years old chose class discussion as the most preferred way of lesson acquisition. Sixteen years old male students' preference tied between lectures and class discussion. Finally, males who did not fit in neither the fifteen nor the sixteen year old categories rated lectures as the top choice in regards to lesson delivery. Females' choice in terms of the most enjoyed

lesson delivery method was very similar to males as illustrated in the table and graph in the addendum. Just like the students in the fifteen, sixteen years old, and the “ other” categories, fifteen and sixteen years old females chose class discussion while

students in the “ other” category picked lectures as the number one preference in terms of lesson delivery. Typically, class discussion is not a major component of Science curriculum and such women may not feel comfortable in the Science classroom environment. In fact,

They are more likely than their male counterparts, however, to drop out of Science and engineering, both in academia and in industry; those who remain earn significantly less, get fewer honours and awards, and struggle more

than their male colleagues. Social scientists have largely concluded that the underlying reasons for such outcomes are more likely attributable to gender discrimination and systemic bias than innate differences (Jesse, p. 833).

Discussion and Analysis

From my observations, the meaning I ascribe is that gender differences in classroom interaction play a crucial role on the school experiences for both sexes at all ages. Boys seem to be less affected by the size of the class and thus, as stated by Howe, “ contribute more to whole-class interaction than girls, regardless of whether we look at the number of utterances or the

quality of their content” (Pg. 15). Therefore, it becomes apparent that girls generally are more likely to avoid tasks in which there is a likelihood of failure or embarrassment in the class. So, they tend to not believe in themselves more, and they appear to not want to subject themselves to the most challenging learning situations such as those present in oral brainstorming and question and answer sessions. These barriers that girls place on themselves are more internal than external.

These internal barriers are attitudes, expectations, and fears that result from subtle differences in the way that males and females are socialized:

Notably, this gender gap often does not emerge until high school, leading some to conclude that these differences in ability and preference between male and female students are not sex differences caused by genetic, chemical or biological factors, but instead gender differences learned through socialization (Lewin, 14).

Males are often more apt to learn things for fun while females often feel they have to do well to gain approval and thus feel a greater stress in classroom situations. This is significant because it puts into perspective the way the different genders learn and how the teacher should be aware that their actions and interactions with the students could either reinforce or remove these gender difference hindrances.

Conclusion

Through my in-class survey, I was able to gather information that addressed the differences of classroom interactions between the two genders. Through this research, I am able to say that the results found supported my hypothesis about males' greater role in the classroom's interface. Males' learning was found to be less negatively affected by the class size; they were to a lesser extent affected by the way the teacher interacts with his/her students especially in the older group; males were generally more open to choose varying lesson delivery methodologies. This

information plays a significant role when it comes to shaping the Social Science classrooms. Teachers should keep in mind the differences between the genders in terms of classroom dynamics and make sure to avoid gender bias that might place females at a disadvantage. In addition, it is suggested in the literature that faculties and school systems

pay close attention to gender diversity of their teaching faculty,

particularly if their female student cohort is less than one in five

in a unit of study (Lange et al., p. 305).

Thus, educators should make sure that girls are encouraged to take a greater part in the classroom's interactions and this can be achieved by frequently performing a gender-bias audit of the classroom, redirect selective attention so that both genders are equally attended to, and by using groups effectively comprised of both sexes to encourage greater and more positive interactions.

As apparent from my case study along with Howe's research, there is still a lot of research that needs to be done in this topic. It has been made clear that differences between the genders in the classroom's environment exist. What is the significance of these differences? Do the differences between the genders in classroom interaction have a long term effect to the gender divisions in society? Perhaps Suh's assumption might answer this question: In instances when gender has been found to be relevant, females tended to fare better than males in their high school competition rates and in future endeavours (Smith-Doerr, p. 8). Does the classroom environment shape the student's personality? All of these topics would make interesting field research topics so that the teacher is better able to address the class keeping in mind the impact and enduring implications of how males and females are influenced by the classroom interaction. In conclusion, in order to achieve a non-intimidating environment in class the teacher should remember gender differences interface and implement the needed strategies in order to make sure that the classroom environment is welcoming and not intimidating to both sexes equally.