

The Effects of Gender-Based Strategies and Same-Sex Grouping in a High School Social Studies Classroom

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effects of gender-based strategies and same-sex grouping in a high school social studies classroom. Prior to implementing my action research in class, I researched gender-based strategies and same-sex grouping. After reading the research, I decided to do an action research project by grouping genders together and trying various strategies in my classroom. The data that I collected during my action research project was field notes/teacher observations, a student survey, and a comparison of students grades before and after the project. The results of the study concluded that the gender-based strategies and same-sex grouping had both positive and negative effects in my classroom.

Introduction

After listening to a class discussion about Deborah Tannen's [1] (1993) research on gender grouping and communication in my Curriculum and Instruction 843 class, I became interested in studying this in my own classroom. Research (Gurian, 2001 [2]; Clarke, 2007 [3]; Gurian & Stevens, 2005 [4]) says that a gender gap in achievement is beginning to form amongst the male and female students in the United States. Male students have a higher dropout rate, more discipline problems, score lower on state assessments, and have a higher incidence for special education classification than their female counterparts. These facts prove that there are some issues that need to be addressed in our educational system.

One approach to help bridge the gender gap in student achievement is to group the same genders together and/or have single-sex classrooms (Gurian, 2001; Clarke, 2007). One benefit is that it may eliminate the boys need to impress the girls or vice versa. Boys may feel more confident and willing to participate without this extra pressure (Gurian, 2005). Grouping genders together may cut down on classroom discipline problems as well.

Another solution to this problem is use different teaching strategies and activities that would appeal to the male students. Gurian (2005) believes that the traditional setting of a classroom is difficult for a boy to adapt to and learn. Boys naturally prefer hands-on activities or learning by trial-and-error. Many classrooms have a tendency to be geared towards sitting still, reading, writing, and being quiet. Because of this set up, boys can sometimes fall behind girls in areas like social studies. Gurian suggests using spatial and graphic aids to improve brain differences between males and females and allow boys the chance to visualize information. Using physical movement and acting out plays or skits are other ideas for helping boys learn in the classroom.

Methods

For my action research project I decided to try using a few gender-based strategies, and group males and females together to study the positive and negative effects with the hopes of bridging any gender gaps that may exist in my classroom.

Prior to the grouping the students together with their same gender, I left classroom set up like any normal day in class. I explained to the students how I would like to group the students together with their same gender for the next couple of weeks. I then allowed the students to pick their own groups and form groups of three to four people of their same sex.

The classroom was run like any normal day. I chose to incorporate a few activities or assignments to provide some variety in class and see if each appealed to the males, females, or both. I had them complete a writing assignment for me where they could chose to write a creative, narrative story, a letter to a friend or family member, or a poem. Also, I had the students write and perform a skit about our topic we were studying. Next, we created a graphic organizer on the board that everyone had to copy down as an assignment. Last, I had them work together on a time capsule project in their gender groups. **Results**

Student Survey

One type of data that I collected from my students is a survey. The students' opinions had mixed results. Fourteen of the twenty-two surveyed students said that they learned the most from the hands-on time capsule project that they did in their groups of the same gender. Both the male and female students reported that they would not like to sit in their groups permanently for the rest of the year.

Teacher Observations

Another type of data that I collected was my own personal observations of the classroom. As mentioned above, I told the students to arrange their desks in any shape as long as they were close enough to discuss and work together in class. In one of my classes, one of my all male groups literally formed a line with their desks. While students were grouped together, I did notice more talking and distractions within their groups than normal. I had to ask students to get quiet and get on task more often. On a positive note, I noticed most of the students getting their assignments finished and completed on time.

Student Average Grades

The last type of data that I analyzed for my project is a comparison of students' past scores and grades to their scores and grades from our projects and assignments while being grouped together with their same gender. Overall, I had mixed results when comparing grades from the past to the present. Some male groups exceeded and worked better together than they did on their own. However, other groups, both male and female, did not do as well as I thought they would or had done in the past.

Discussion

After looking at the data that I collected, I would say that the gender grouping and strategies that I tried in class had both positive and negative aspects. One positive aspect is that almost all of the students expressed that they liked at least one or two of the strategies that I tried in class. Some of the students, especially two male groups surprised me on how well they worked together with their groups and completed the time capsule project. Also, I found it interesting to see how the students communicated and worked together in class. As I mentioned, one male group made a line out of their desks. This proved Deborah Tannen's (1993) theory that males like to communicate side-by-side. However, this was the most obvious instance of this. The other groups formed square shapes and mostly communicated face-to-face.

Most indicated on the survey that they would not like to sit with their gender permanently or that it did not matter either way. But, almost all students said that their projects would not have gone as smoothly if I had chosen their groups for them. I would have to agree with Gurian and other researchers that said that boys like physical movement and hands-on lessons. According to my survey of my students, the majority of the boys said they liked doing the skits in class. The majority of the girls, on the other hand, did not like the skit. Most of the girls said that they did not like getting up in front of the class to speak and perform. Also, most of the students expressed that they learned the most from doing the time capsule project which was hands-on and with their gender groups.

Implications

One drawback to gender grouping that I saw was that the students were more difficult to manage. I believe the way that they were grouped, mostly with their friends, was the problem. In the future, if I were to try this again, I would be curious to know if I had picked their groups if this would have been a big of an issue. Or, if I let them stay in their groups permanently if the excitement, lack of focus, or talking would wear off after awhile. Also, I teach in a small school and my project might not have been as successful because everyone has known everyone for a while. Furthermore, I believe this may be more successful with younger students.

Conclusions

In conclusion, gender-based strategies and same-sex grouping had varied outcomes in my classroom. Some strategies I found to be very useful, like hands-on activities, which I will probably use again in my classroom. I was surprised to hear that some of my female students did not like to do certain activities in class. I do not think I will try the same-sex grouping again in my classroom. I think my students may be too old for this and they all know each other since they are from a small town. Even though I did not have all positive results, I feel like I learned what not to do as a high school educator.

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[1] Tannen, Deborah. *Gender and conversational interaction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993.

[2] Gurian, Michael. *Boys and girls learn differently! A guide for teachers and parents*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001.

[3] Clarke, S. *Single-Sex Schools and Classrooms*. *The Informed Educator*, p. 1-12, 2007.

[4] Gurian, M., and Stevens, K. *The mind of boys: Saving our sons from falling behind in school and life*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005