

## **Learning Differences in Genders**

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### **Abstract**

As school districts look for ways to improve student achievement, many instructional best practices and modifications to the learning environment have been used. The purpose of this study was to investigate differences for boys and girls in terms of the relation between different aspects of learning.

Considerable discussion from years have centered on the appropriate curriculum, including differences in abilities and learning styles of boys and girls and whether they should learn the same subjects in school. By 1890, coeducation was clearly the most common model for public schools. In 1972, nondiscrimination legislation was passed to protect students from discrimination in education based on gender. Within this body of research the emphasis has been on the type of subject matter (e.g., English, science), teacher experience in implementation, and the organizational elements of single-sex schools (e.g., school size, course offerings, climate for learning, leadership), student prior achievement and background, sex-role stereotyping, and student confidence and engagement [6]

**Key words:** Curriculum, instructional practices, Gender issues, Heterogeneous classes, Homogeneous classes, Learning differences, Stereotypes, Student achievement, sex-role, legislation.

### **Brain Based and physical differences**

The most striking difference in how the brain differs amongst genders is what [8] and others suggest is the system of nerves, the corpus callosum that connects the right and left hemispheres of the brain. In females this structure is, on average, 20% larger than it is in males [8]. This could be why females seem to be able to use both sides of the brain in

processing information and are able to multitask more efficiently than males. Studies on boys and girls also point out some interesting differences in both hearing and seeing. Studies reported by Sax indicate that girls hear at different levels—in effect, better than boys do. Other studies show that girls are able to read facial expressions more astutely than boys are, and this difference is related to a different chemistry in the eye and corresponding receptor in the brain. Boys are better at spatial tasks, which give them an advantage in areas such as mathematics, graphs, and maps. Girls seem to use both sides of the brain and tend to be better at literacy-related activities. Boys' brains tend to have more cortical areas, mainly in the right hemisphere, wired for spatial/mechanical processing than do girls' brains; girls' brains generally have greater cortical emphasis on verbal processing. A girl's prefrontal cortex is generally more active than is a boy's of the same age, and her frontal lobe generally develops earlier. These are the decision-making areas of the brain, as well as the reading/writing/word production areas. [3, 4]

Boys' brains tend to go into a more notable rest state than girls' brains do. Because the brain's first priority is survival, it scans its environment for information that would alert it to any threat, challenge, or information crucial to its survival. If the classroom is not providing any stimuli that the brain perceives as important, the male brain tends to slip more quickly into a rest state (which manifests itself as boredom or "zoning out"). In the classroom, boys often try to avoid these natural male rest states by engaging in activities like tapping their pencils or poking at classmates. Many educators study [6] implied that in public schools the boys were being taught using methods more conducive to the ways girls learn. Boys require more hands-on projects to address their "various learning styles," and a "differentiated instruction" in which all can benefit [6]. Physical activity, such as running and jumping, keeps male brains developing in healthy ways that promote learning. To encourage a boy's natural learning style, provide opportunities for him to use his energy to learn. Letting boys explore, touch, and manipulate will help them develop the skills they will need to be successful in school.

### **Social Behavior of Adolescents**

Theorists have encouraged the proposition that children's personality, and adult character development, has formed from long-lasting influences from parents during home socialization. Consequently, a teacher's negative perception of parental influence commonly produces a self-fulfilling prophecy in which the teacher holds little hope of changing the child's behavior; a negative attitude frequently conveyed to children [15]. When both genders are present in a coeducational classroom, each gender tends to coalesce more tightly within itself when each recognizes a set of group norms that encourage conformity. The resultant in-group favoritism and out-group hostility inclines to produce group contrast effects, and these effects will widen differences between groups or create differences where none previously existed in single-sex settings. Once children have assimilated as members of a group, they will tend to conform, more and more closely, to the group norms. Furthermore, children from atypical homes do not

necessarily transfer their atypical home behaviors to the peer group . Instead, children will transfer behavior learned at home to the peer group only if it is shared and approved by the majority of the peer group. Consequently, children's peer groups create their own culture by selecting and rejecting various aspects of adult culture and by making their own cultural innovations. Thus, in single-gendered settings, in-groups will attach to the high-status, dominant but supportive adult, regardless of teacher gender [15].

### **Successful Implementation Strategies**

Rice and Dolgin (2002) reported that, "Peers may play a particularly important role in the development of children's gender identities" (p. 195). Boys and girls create very distinct cultures; when they are in same-gender groups, they act and play very differently. Girls are talkative and cooperative, boys are competitive and physical. [12] Teachers need to understand these differences and be purposeful in the treatment of each to send the healthiest messages to adolescents [9]. School districts as well as teachers have adopted strategies that have proven to be successful. Most of these strategies involve using movement during instruction, building on the visual aspect of the lesson or task, and incorporating student interest and choice. Strategies proven to be successful in the classroom and address the needs of all students include (a) social/emotional programming (e.g., advisory sessions, community meetings, mentoring); (b) cultural events (e.g., speakers, cultural awareness programs, Fatherhood and Motherhood appreciation); (c) community service; (d) high school and college preparation; (e) afterschool academic programs required for struggling students; (f) a rigorous curriculum (e.g., AP and honors classes); (g) discipline/uniforms; (h) culturally responsive or relevant instruction; (i) positive role modeling and/or mentoring programs; and (j) professional development (with emphasis on teaching the urban child and understanding of research on boy's learning and development).

### **Perceptions and Behaviors**

Lerner and Kruger (1997) studied attachment according to a developmental perspective and noted interesting facts about adolescence. They found that representations of the self and of others were significantly related to the quality of attachment developed with teachers and parents. These researchers refer to studies that have demonstrated a positive relationship between teachers' support and a more positive self-concept in relation to school and academic tasks. They concluded, as Eccles, Wigfield, Midgley, MacIver, and Feldlaufer (1993) did, that the quality of the teacher student relationship is closely related to students' motivation and attitudes. Studies from Vallerand and his colleagues [13]) also revealed that the teachers' behavior has an indirect influence, either positive or negative, on students' motivation. Thus, the perception of the support teachers provide acts upon students' competence beliefs, indirectly affecting their engagement in academic tasks. Some findings in mathematics achievement motivation also indicate that teacher support is as important as parental support. The same conclusion was reached in review of studies conducted in several countries. Other researchers have highlighted the

role of social agents, such as parents and teachers, in the development of students' self-perceptions and the value they attribute to academic tasks. Several authors reported that adolescents' academic motivation level is greatly influenced by their perceptions of the level of support and encouragement provided by parents and teachers [7,16]). These researchers also noted that these perceptions might have a greater impact than achievement in explaining effort and academic and career choices. The attitudes of parents and teachers toward mathematics and toward viewing their children as learners of mathematics affect the children's own perceptions of their competence and the value they ascribe to the domain (Singh, Granville, & Dika, 2002). Additionally, Frenzel, Pekrun, Goetz, and von Hofe (2005) argued that achievement in mathematics is mediated by the expectations of teachers and parents. Most teachers realize that the preparation they received in graduate school and teacher certification programs to teach *all students* was in fact training for verbal and sedentary learning. This presents a large elephant in the room for teachers and schools. Given the structures, expectations, and teaching styles in today's classrooms, teachers generally have more difficulty teaching boys than girls [8]. In a classroom of 25 students, five to seven boys may be having difficulties, whether these are overt issues or a tendency to check out of the learning process. They need a kind of instruction teachers have not been trained to provide, and the lack of such teaching profoundly affects the overall grades, test scores, and behavior of the class, as well as teachers' sense of whether they are teaching effectively.

### **Professional Development**

For teachers the imperative is to learn about the differences in gender. Teachers should accept that learning occurs differently for each gender, and to measure out activities and experiences that favor one some of the time, and the other some of the time. Keep in mind that although some girls may be more linguistically advanced than boys are, some boys are just as advanced. Although some boys manipulate objects well and see patterns better than girls do, some girls are headed toward engineering schools. Therefore, to teach only one way for each gender would be a disservice to the boys and girls who do not fit the stereotype [8]. When teachers plan learning experiences that favor one gender, they are also doing a great thing for the other. For as boys see girls appropriately modeling relationship behaviors, the boys learn how to be more sensitive and open. Likewise, when girls see the appropriate use of assertiveness that boys learn early, the girls see that this can be used to their advantage as well [9]. Relevant instruction emerged as another key salient academic need of Black and Latino boys [6]. Relevant instruction, defined as instruction that connects to students' cultures or current lives, was conceptualized as a remedy for the deficits in Black and Latino males' education, which administrators stated were caused in large part by the boys' disinterest or their inability to see themselves in curricula in traditional public schools. There is a need to center teaching and the curriculum around the educational needs of their students, with careful attention given to the social, emotional, and academic challenges urban students face [6].

Single-sex schools administrators overwhelmingly report that the curriculum needs to extend beyond the walls of the classroom in order to not only prepare the urban student for academic success in these schools, but throughout the rest of their academic careers [6]. The role that teachers play in their students' development has been the source of several recent studies. Gordon, Iwamoto, Ward, Potts, and Boyd (2009) suggest that not only do students need teachers who are highly skilled, but they also need culturally sensitive and responsive teachers. Teachers are seen as a vital element to the success of the single-sex schools. The need for on-going professional development is crucial for both the success of teachers and students they serve [6].

Performance goals can have some positive functions. Three important types of achievement goals are (a) mastery goals, (b) performance-approach goals, and (c) performance-avoidance goals. A mastery goal orientation reflects an emphasis on learning and understanding, whereas a performance orientation focuses on demonstrating competence in relation to others. Students pursuing performance approach goals seek social recognition and success over others, while those pursuing Performance-avoidance goals seek to minimize the negative impact of failure on self esteem and to avoid looking incompetent according to comparative standards .

### **Conclusion**

Hence in the light of the views presented it is important for teachers to have a clear understanding of these goals and how to use this information to inform instruction. The urban child is faced with many social barriers and teachers must be the catalyst for students to achieve. Teachers must learn how to match a student's learning style and behavior with instruction. Single-sex environments have been shown to increase competence and confidence in students. Students learn best by interacting with other students, especially in an environment where students are no longer intimidated, embarrassed, or overlooked by the opposite sex. The literature also identifies some advantages of coeducational instruction. Coeducational instruction allows for one sex to see how the other sex thinks, feels, and reacts. Environments should allow for student interaction as well as for instructional activities that cater to both sexes. Future studies are needed to assess the differences in the instructional environment and compare similar schools to evaluate the effectiveness. In the end, I believe although it's not a big deal whether you choose single-gender over co-ed, co-ed schools. **We are all different, learn a bit different and at somewhat different rates.**

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