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“The Boys like Action and the Girls like Emotion:”

Teaching Social Studies in Single-Sex Classrooms

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Abstract

The State of South Carolina has embraced single-sex education to a greater degree (and at a quicker pace) than any other state in the union. Yet, given this push for single-sex classrooms, there is scant research that specifically addresses what instructional practices “work best” when teaching boys and girls separately. This study focuses on the practices and perceptions of teaching social studies within select single-sex elementary classrooms.

Introduction

One of the hottest (and arguably most controversial) issues in education is single-sex classrooms. Though this notion of partitioning the sexes is not a new American educational phenomenon, it was, until two decades ago, an issue that had supposedly “seen its day.” Through the often odd coupling of morality and legality, single-sex schools in general, and single-sex classrooms in particular, are on the rise (Riordan, Faddis, & Beam, 2008). In 2002, only eleven public schools in the United States offered single-sex classrooms. Presently, there are at least 540 public schools offering single-sex classrooms, with more than 200 schools located in South Carolina (National Association for Single Sex Public Education, 2009). Between August 2007, and April 2008, single-sex classrooms in South Carolina increased by roughly 300 percent. Currently, 91% of school districts in the state currently support or are considering supporting single-sex classrooms (South Carolina Department of Education, Office of Public School Choice, 2009).

At issue here is not that single-sex classrooms exist, but what happens inside of them. What instructional tools, methods and strategies, “work best” within single-sex classrooms? What perceptual benefits result from particular strategies used to teach particular disciplines within particular classrooms? And specifically, how do teachers perceive and practice teaching social studies within single-sex classrooms? With more and more school districts in South Carolina flirting with the option of creating single-sex opportunities, it behooves in-service and pre-service teachers alike to understand both the blatant and subtle intricacies of teaching social studies inside the single-sex classroom.

Literature Review

There is an abundance of literature that extols the virtues and/or vices of single-sex classrooms, primarily addressing the meta-issues of management, confidence, comfort, and academic achievement (Cruz, 2000; Gilbert, 2007; Meyer, 2008; Ruhlman, 1996; Sadker, Sadker, & Zittleman, 2009; Salomone, 2003; Singh & Vaught, 1998; Spielhagen, 2008; Stabiner, 2002; Streitmatter, 1999; Wills, Kirkpatrick, & Hutton, 2006). There is also a concerted body of literature that addresses the practical application

of strategies within single-sex classrooms (Gurian, Stevens, & Daniels, 2009; Gurian, Stevens, & King, 2008). In regards to social studies instruction, activities rather than strategies were most often presented. Though important, these superficial activities failed to address what strategies are ultimately used and, importantly, why they are used.

There is limited research that does examine what instructional strategies were used when teaching math and/or science within single-sex classrooms. In looking at instructional strategies used to teach science, Parker and Rennie (2002) concluded that, though instructional strategies were for the most part sex-neutral, providing more open-ended questions and relating the curriculum to life experiences, increased the confidence and competence of female students. Specific to elementary mathematics, Carr and Davis (2001) concluded that girls tended to favor the use of hands-on manipulatives, whereas boys tended to solve problems individually and based primarily on recall. Within the context of middle school math and science instruction, Baker (2002) concluded that boys responded positively to technology-based activities (using the internet, hand-held calculators), as well as activities that allowed them to move about the classroom. Conversely, girls tended to prefer working either individually or in small groups and were more receptive to content-based discussion. Friend (2006) found that the instructional strategies used to teach science were similar in both all-male and an all-female classroom. To date, there is no research that has addressed the relationship between perception (why) and practice (how) concerning the teaching of social studies in single-sex classrooms.

In 2008, and again in 2009, the South Carolina Department of Education's Office of Public School Choice sent a survey to teachers, students, and parents affiliated with single-sex classrooms, soliciting their perception of the general and particular nature of single-sex education. In 2008 and 2009 combined, 85% of single-sex K-12 teachers stated that their students experienced an increase in confidence resulting from the single-sex classroom experience (South Carolina Department of Education, Office of Public School Choice, 2008, 2009).

With relevance to social studies, single-sex teachers from across South Carolina were asked to note (amongst other indicators) perceived increases or improvements in student self-confidence, participation, and collaboration. Combining years 2008 and 2009, teachers noted that roughly 85% of both male and female students in single-sex classroom experienced an increase or improvement in their self-confidence. Overall increases or improvements were also noted in participation (84%) and collaboration (86%). Girls in single-sex social studies classrooms were perceived to have increased or improved their self-confidence, participation, and collaboration to a greater degree than boys in similarly constructed environments (South Carolina Department of Education, Office of Public School Choice, 2008, 2009).

Methodology

The purpose of this research is to provide an initial snapshot of perceptions and practices of teaching social studies in single-sex classrooms. Therefore, the scope of this research was purposefully limited to three elementary schools within a single district in the Central Savannah River Area (CSRA) of South Carolina. Initial lines of inquiry were made through the district and corresponding principals at each school. Each principal provided a list of teachers who currently teach social studies within single-sex classrooms at their respective school. A total of 10 teachers were identified. Nine of the ten teachers

were female. Two of the teachers have taught in a single-sex classroom for more than one year. Two second grade, one third grade, three fourth grade and four fifth grade teachers were represented.

The identified teachers were contacted via email and all agreed to be interviewed. The interviews were conducted in person at each school and lasted roughly 45 minutes. The interview format was semi-structured in nature, balancing scripted and non-scripted (spontaneous/follow-up) questions. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded. From the responses, three dominant strands emerged: student benefits, differentiated effective instructional strategies, and teacher perceptions.

Interview Results

Respondents were initially asked to discuss how the teaching of social studies within a single-sex classroom has benefitted their students. Several teachers commented that single-sex classrooms have increased student confidence in social studies. One teacher stated, “At the beginning of the year, my girls just didn’t like social studies. They told me it was boring, horrible, irrelevant. But as the year went, they really started to warm-up to [social studies]. I actually had a few girls say that social studies is now their favorite subject.” In reference to increased confidence, a respondent stated, “Having all girls, there really isn’t that competition with the boys to answer a question or contribute. Boys can easily dominate a classroom. Without the boys around, my girls are much more likely to raise their hand and voice their opinion. They don’t feel intimidated or afraid.”

Gained confidence was also a theme pertinent to boys. A teacher of all-boys noticed that, “My fifth-grade boys are very conscious of what the girls think of them. If they raise their hand and give the wrong answer in front of girls, some of the boys would just melt. This isn’t the case with in an all-male classroom. If a boy gets the wrong answer, there isn’t that sense of shame or ‘they aren’t going to like me anymore.’ My boys just roll on.” One teacher called this new-found confidence the “social studies swagger.”

A second theme that emerged from the interviews dealt with the strategies or tools used to teach social studies within all-male or all-female classrooms. When asked which methodologies work best when teaching social studies to girls, group work, creative projects, discussion, writing assignments, role-playing, presentations, and visual representation were consistently mentioned. “Girls are terribly collaborative. They enjoy working in groups, sharing ideas, bouncing ideas off of each other.” Another respondent stated, “My girls like to show. They like to demonstrate. They like to create things. I have my girls create a ton of visual displays, like posters, cartoons, pictures. They get terribly bored reading text straight out of a book. They would much rather create social studies than to just read about social studies.”

Respondents indicated that hands-on demonstrations, visuals, debates, role-playing, and simulations work best when teaching social studies to boys. “My boys have to touch it. They have to do it. They can’t sit still. For the most part, they can’t stand reading. They get very little from the textbook. So I have to provide other ways that they understand the content.” A teacher of all-boys stated that, “I tell you what doesn’t work – group work. I tried this at the beginning of the year, thinking we learn best by sharing. Not with my boys! They are lone wolves.” One teacher flatly stated, “Boys like the action and girls like the emotion of social studies.”

Emerging from this strand were several comments regarding what was essentially “missing” from teaching social studies in a single-sex environment. A male teacher stated,

One of the problems [of teaching social studies in a single-gender classroom] is that my students don’t get to hear the other perspective. My boys do not hear the female perspective on a given topic. All they hear are the perspectives of other boys. So I try to bring in varying perspectives because it’s important that my students hear all sides of the issue, not just their side.

This sentiment was seconded by other respondents as well.

My students benefit from interacting with all of their classmates, male or female. The girls are missing that ‘male perspective’ of history – crawling around in the dirt, getting messy, blowing things up. And the boys are missing the ‘female perspective’ which is much more emotional, much more personal. I’ve struggled with this all year long; how to create a balanced perspective of social studies. This has been my greatest challenge.

Lastly, respondents were asked to relay their perceptions of teaching social studies in single-sex classrooms. Respondents overwhelmingly stated that it has been a positive experience, one that they would continue to enjoy. “As a female teacher of all boys, I have learned a great deal in how to create a lesson that will engage my students. I find myself ‘thinking like a boy’ when I make some of my lessons!” A male teacher in an all-male classroom stated, “I have forged a relationship with my boys that I don’t know I would have if I taught girls. We talk the same language, we think in similar ways. I am able to get the best out of my boys by being one.”

Discussion

What emerged from these admittedly cursory set of interviews are many of the same themes evidenced in the general literature regarding single-sex education as well as discipline specific strategies, particularly in the fields of math and science.

The interviews revealed that both boys and girls feel more comfortable and confident in a single-sex social studies classroom. Girls are less intimidated and boys are less self-conscious. This finding supports previous research equating single-sex classrooms and increased confidence in general (Willis, Kirkpatrick, & Hutton, 2006; Salomone, 2007), and specifically in the context of social studies instruction (SCDOE, 2008, 2009).

Respondents indicated that, in general, girls learn and demonstrate social studies best through collaboration, discussion, and visual and creative expressions. In fact, the most dominant means by which girls demonstrated their understanding of and engagement with social studies was through discussion. Though boys also enjoyed a discussion-based and visually rich social studies classroom, they were more likely to prefer hands-on activities and role-playing. Girls were more collaborative and conversant; boys were more tactile and taciturn. These findings alternately support and refute previous research into single-sex education within discipline-specific contexts.

With relevance to teacher perceptions, all respondents indicated that they enjoyed teaching social studies within a single-sex classroom and would continue to do so. All respondents also stated that they would not want to “switch” classrooms (from say female

to male) and would prefer to continue to teach the demographic of their current classroom.

Though beneficial in many ways, a number of respondents stated that a single-sex environment is not conducive to the sharing of alternate perspectives. A few respondents made conscious and consistent efforts to bring the counter narrative or the “other side” into the classroom. The absence of this “balance of power,” as one teacher stated, was a clear and consistent concern that permeated throughout the interviews.

These findings raise questions that may further serve to contextualize this research as well as spur further discussions into the relationship between single-sex classrooms and the teaching of social studies. Does teacher experience impact the single-sex classroom? Might changes in perceptions (as particularly noted in girls) be correlated to teacher experience? As single-sex teachers gain experience, do their strategies and/or perceptions change over time? Are the same instructional strategies and activities used for all content areas when teaching single-sex students? Or is social studies unique? Lastly, in the age of accountability – do single-sex classrooms increase student achievement in social studies? Without longitudinal data correlating PACT/PASS data to students in single-sex environments, this question, and others, will linger.

Conclusions

With single-sex education firmly planted in classrooms throughout South Carolina, it is important to understand, not just why single-sex initiatives exist, but what pedagogical and perceptual practices are evident inside such classrooms. Though this research focused exclusively on the teaching of social studies, further research into the relationship between single-sex classrooms and other content areas is needed. Yet, ultimately, the pressing question remains: Can single-sex classrooms inspire and engage student interest in social studies more so than a traditional classroom setting? Might it not be worth a try?

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