

Building Sisterhood and Brotherhood in Gender-Specific Classrooms

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The Dr. Walter Cunningham School for Excellence in Waterloo, Iowa is a public school that began offering parents an option of gender specific classrooms or a coed classroom in 2003. Our school serves a diverse population consisting of African American, Hispanic, and Caucasian students. Cunningham School enrolls approximately 400 students, of which eighty-five percent qualify for free and reduced lunch. Based on research of best practices, Cunningham School provides a continuous year calendar, staff and student uniforms, early start time, and most recently a gender specific classroom option. As second grade veteran teachers, we have known for years that boys and girls learn differently. In the past five years, evidence-based research has allowed us to explore these differences and develop practical applications for the hard-wired differences that are evident between males and females.

An expert in the field of gender specific teaching, Dr. Leonard Sax, has offered teachers and parents the knowledge and the tools to develop instructional strategies for teachers based on his years of experience and his knowledge of the biological differences between males and females. Dr. Jawanza Kunjufu, an expert in the field of raising African American achievement, offers strategies to infuse culturally relevant strategies with our gender specific strategies. With the assistance of Dr. Sax and Dr. Kunjufu, the support of our district administrators and parents, and continuous on-going professional development, we have been able to implement a second grade all-girls class and a second grade all-boys class for the past four years. Being successful gender-specific teachers means that we have to first recognize the fundamental differences between sexes and then develop instructional strategies based on those biological differences in our classroom curriculum.

The past five years of research has shown that gender is hard-wired, but that there are no hard-wired differences in the “ability” to learn. Though the areas of learning develop at different times for males and females, they will eventually reach the same place. That is why gender specific teaching strategies will help us to work towards closing the achievement gap between sexes now, thus enhancing their learning experience and increasing test scores. Our goals for incorporating gender-based classrooms include improved academic achievement, increased standardized tests scores, and enhanced self-esteem and self-worth that positively contribute to our learning environment as well as our community. Through our research and gender-specific experiences, we have been able to define developmental differences that occur between sexes and offer instructional strategies to close any achievement gaps that may occur.

Recognizing the developmental differences in boys is essential. As a female teacher of all male students, we have had to redefine what classroom management in our classrooms means. We now understand that movement is not just to be tolerated, it is necessary. Boys can think better if they are able to move around. To expect a second grade boy to stay still in his chair all day at school is not only unproductive; it’s detrimental to his learning potential. Given the opportunity to move around in a structured environment, boys are allowed to explore their boundaries and stay actively engaged in the learning process.

Team competition in academics works for boys. Boys respond positively to high stakes tests, time limits, and cooperative learning in groups. Based on this knowledge, we have incorporated academic games that include Spelling Baseball, Math Basketball, and Reading for Football Yards. Using non-fiction literature that involves boy friendly themes has also been successful. Boys tend to prefer non-fiction so we use that as a hook when teaching comprehension strategies. We choose books with strong male main characters and real life events. Boys will develop a love for all literature if you begin by choosing books they prefer.

We have adopted boy-friendly strategies such as graphic organizers, hands-on activities, competitive learning, and immediate feedback opportunities. Speaking more loudly in order to best meet the needs of our male students has been effective. Boys generally have shorter attention spans than girls. We change up our instructional periods and offer a structured routine incorporating movement with our academic tasks. We have found that 2nd-grade boys prefer fewer words from the teacher and more task-oriented opportunities. We give directions that are clear and the point. Problems occur only when academic expectations are unclear or if too much down time is allowed. If a problem does arise and we need to have a serious conference with a boy, we will put a game or model in front of us in order to engage them in conversation. Discipline problems will not be an issue if boys are given the opportunity to be actively engaged in decisions and in their learning.

Gender-based instructional strategies are also vital to the success of an all-girls classroom. Some of the strategies used within the classroom were collaborative grouping, use of manipulatives, real-life application, relaxing music, and unconditional positive reinforcement. The goal of our classroom environment was to encourage girls to be risk-takers when performing academic tasks. Collaborative grouping played an instrumental role in encouraging the girls to be leaders during instructional time. During math lessons, we would use this strategy to promote positive support within the group. We felt this was a valuable time to help the girls experience the role of leadership. The exciting part of these collaborative group sessions was that it provided an opportunity for all of the girls to understand the importance of a leadership role. Through this process, it was amazing to see how the girls would encourage each other to accomplish the task at hand, thus continuing to promote the idea of a sisterhood. Sisters look out for each other and help each other out. In times of hardship, these sisters could always count on each other when they needed each other most academically and socially. Girls feeling that unconditional love at all times has been a key component to their academic success.

In recognition of the developmental differences in females, we have provided a loving environment and extra support in order to meet their needs both personally and academically. The girls' self-confidence and approach to risk-taking academically has helped them to achieve in extra-curricular areas as well, such as music, gym, and art. We saw some of our quietest girls volunteering for solos in music. Some girls who had never previously showed any interest in sports were playing basketball with the boys outside for recess. The strategies that were implemented in the classroom carried over into their everyday lives. The girls were doing more than just excelling in math and science; they were reaching for the stars and never looking back. The instructional strategies used within the all-girls classroom are based on research and are essential to the success of the girls' academic achievement. These strategies are matched and implemented according to the girls' strengths and developmental needs.

It is time we acknowledge that girls and boys who enter our classrooms learn differently. They are the future mothers, fathers, sisters, and brothers that will one day lead our communities. As we develop sisterhood and brotherhood in our classrooms, we promote the idea of community support in and out of the classroom setting. Whether students are male or female, we feel that it's extremely important to have high expectations for all children. Combining high expectations and a culturally relevant curriculum has led to our success as second grade single gender teachers.

For years, single sex classes have been available to only those who could afford it. Many of our country's leaders and groundbreakers have been educated in a private, single sex educational environment and have reaped the benefits from that type of education. With the current research available on hard-wired differences, we now have the chance and the tools within a public school setting to offer every student these unique opportunities.