

Engaging the Differences Between Boys and Girls

Single-sex education can be an effective approach to educating middle school students, as evidenced by the experience at this South Carolina school.

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by David Chadwell

We teach at a time when meeting the individual needs of each student is key to their learning success. While differentiated instruction is a common element of classroom practice and professional development, I believe that using gender differences to enlighten our teaching is an extension of differentiated instruction, and that setting up single-gender classrooms is appropriate for middle school students. Students experience enormous changes during these three years, and teachers in a single-gender environment can help students manage that transition, keep the desire to learn alive, and support academic achievement.

Three years ago, TWO Academies began as a full-day single-gender program at Dent Middle School in Columbia, South Carolina. At that time, there were few public schools in the nation attempting single-gender classes. TWO Academies provided a new academic choice for middle school parents and students. In the first year of this program, the percentage of students earning “proficient” or “advanced” scores on the Palmetto Achievement Challenge Test grew by 14 percent in English language arts, 17 percent in mathematics, 24 percent in science, and 19 percent in social studies. These increases were far above the district average, and continued the following year.

More Than a Structural Change

The greatest mistake of single-gender classrooms has been, and continues to be, to only segregate students by gender without integrating instructional strategies that reflect gender difference. Simply segregating students by gender is not a teaching strategy; it is a structural change. Once a school has committed to a single-gender learning environment, it is the teacher’s task to teach the boys and girls differently.

At TWO Academies we use research on gender differences to plan and develop instructional strategies. Integrating the strategies has been a trial-and-error process. There are, however, several features of our program that I believe are essential to any single-gender environment. I am not suggesting that all boys and all girls learn in a particular way. Instead, I offer these strategies that have worked for us in the hope that they may be helpful to others as they work with their own students.

Teachers must recognize the energy that boys bring to the classroom as a learning opportunity instead of behavior that needs to be controlled. Here are two strategies for working with boys:

- Put boys to work after providing them with an abbreviated, bulleted set of instructions. Have them answer questions after 10 minutes of work.
- Use problem-based learning. Start units or lessons with an essential question involving decisions or choices.

Teachers must delight in the richness of girls, and accept their tendency to please the teacher, all while appropriately channeling their desire to please during discussions, lessons, or units.

Here are three strategies for working with girls:

- Take time to explain instructional processes, answer their questions, consider their suggestions, and probe their hypotheses.
- Use project-based learning. Embed units and lessons with connections to the real world, and show relationships between the content/skills and the lives of real people.
- Monitor them as they work, prod their learning, and support their hesitation.

Our teachers often implement strategies related to the differences in the way boys and girls see, hear, and engage the world. Successful learning experiences with boys tend to involve tossing a ball or soft object during classroom discussions, or having the boys stand when asking or answering questions. During math lessons, our boys have the option of standing and working at whiteboards around the room. During social studies, the teacher plays “Last Man Standing,” where boys sit if they get the answer wrong. The sitting students must write the correct responses to the remaining questions.

Structuring classroom work into stations is also beneficial to boys because they tend to focus better when there are clear, segmented tasks to be completed within a structured time limit. Students get up and move to the next station in order to complete the next task. This strategy can be used when there are a variety of tasks for students to complete. Alternatively, students can complete a set number of items from a single worksheet at each work station. Allow boys to stand as needed; set up a “tapping time” when it is OK for boys to tap their pens or pencils on their legs, desks, or chairs; and be accepting of loud talk when appropriate.

Circle discussions tend to be successful when working with girls because each girl has a chance to be heard and respected. We often use the “Think-Pair-Share” strategy. Stations also can be used with girls—but I would not recommend placing a time limit on each station. Instead, indicate what is expected by the middle or end of the class, and allow the girls an opportunity to move freely from station to station. Again, monitoring their progress is critical. Allow girls the opportunity to color assignments before handing them in, keep noise distractions to a minimum, and provide time for collaboration.

We have adopted two additional structural changes that have been extremely successful:

- Sixth-grade students have a 10-minute break after their first two classes. During this break students put their books in their next classroom, use the restroom, and go outside. The boys usually opt for a quick game of football, basketball, or wall ball. The girls generally walk around, talk, and visit with friends or a teacher. Down time from academic requirements is important for all students. It provides boys an opportunity to have gross motor movement, and it allows girls to make connections with their friends.
- The second change is a single-gender advisory course. Middle school students, in particular, need support as they transition from elementary school, navigate obstacles, and celebrate their successes. Our program starts in sixth grade with a course we call “Focus.” Organization and team-building are the main components for the boys, while friendship and study habits are the main components for the girls.

A Final Word

We are learning more and more about the learning differences between boys and girls. In middle school these differences are great, and they can have academic, social, physical, and emotional implications. Single-gender programs provide teachers with the opportunity to engage these differences to the benefit of their students.

David Chadwell is lead teacher for boys at TWO Academies at Dent Middle School in Columbia, South Carolina. He is also the southeast regional director for the National Association for Single Sex Public Education. His e-mail address is dchadwel@dm.richland2.org.