Gender and Cultural Differences in the Classroom

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Abstract

This paper uses research conducted on the influences of gender and cultural differences to demonstrate the important role each difference plays in the classroom. The research evidences the existence of gaps in achievement and success in school between males and females, and between members of various culture groups. Research also shows that teachers’ responses to these differences in their classroom can have a profound influence on student success, and there are both general and specific strategies to help teachers make these influences positive. Gender and cultural differences are real and are becoming increasingly important in today’s classrooms, and the need of teachers who are aware of these differences and know how to respond to them is greater than ever.
The Importance of Gender and Cultural Influences in the Classroom

The differences in students, also known as learner diversity, greatly affect how they perform, interact with their peers and teacher, and achieve in the classroom. The sources of learner diversity include socioeconomic status, individual differences, language, gender, and culture, and not only affect the students directly, but through how peers and teachers respond to this diversity (Eggen & Kauchak, 2010, p. 96). In 2007, the United States minority population reached 34 percent (U.S. Bureau of Census, 2007) and the male to female ratio was 97.1 to 100 (U.S. Bureau of Census, 2006-2008); researchers from the U.S. Bureau of Census (2003) predict that by the year 2020 the minority population in the United States will have increased to a little less than half of the population (as cited in Eggen & Kauchak, 2010, p. 97). Every student in every classroom is a member of both a cultural and gender group, and it is important for teachers to be aware of the differences within these groups to provide each student with the best possible education.

In Anita Woolfolk’s book *Educational Psychology* (2004) she identifies the consistent below average achievement of some ethnic groups as a major concern for schools. In 2007, only 78.6% of Hispanic students between the ages of 25 and 29 had graduated from high school, compared to 94.7% of the white population from this age group; 91.6% of African Americans graduated (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2009). Very real differences also exist between males and females and result in achievement differences including lower scores for girls on the Scholastic Aptitude Test and American College Test, and a higher male rate of failing grades, drop outs, and citations for disciplinary infractions. Although gaps in achievement on standardized tests
between some ethnic groups have been narrowing over the past two to three decades (Woolfolk, 2004, p. 163), and legislation such as Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 has provided some gains in gender equality through legal protection against sex discrimination for approximately 70 million students and employees in education and related fields (Zittleman, n.d.), evidence suggests that both boys and girls are facing limited academic and social development as a result of traditional gender-based stereotypes and inequities that continue to prevail (Zittleman, n.d.), and Black and Hispanic students continue to be chosen less for gifted classes and acceleration or enrichment programs, lose out in science and math as early as elementary school, and are more likely to be tracked into “basic skills” classes (Woolfolk, 2004, p. 167). While these and other inequalities continue to be present, the importance of teacher sensitivity to learner diversity and the differences in students is becoming increasingly more important.

**Student Gender and Cultural Differences According to the Experts**

A great deal of research has been conducted to evaluate teachers’ treatment of male and female students (Woolfolk, 2004, p. 172). The results reveal that teachers call on boys more than girls, wait longer for boys’ answers, and engage boys more when they call out (Zittleman, n.d.). The consequences of this treatment are that girls tend to participate less as they continue through school, and by the time girls finish college they have received an average of 1,800 hours less of attention and instruction than boys from their teachers (Woolfolk, 2004, p. 172). Similarly, teachers tend to give much less attention to minority group boys (Woolfolk, 2004, p. 172).
In addition to a pattern of less instruction for some ethnic groups, culture can influence student responses to and success with teacher instruction through cultural attitudes and values, patterns of adult-child interactions, and teachers’ organization of the classroom and its match with the student’s home culture (Eggen & Kauchak, 2010, p. 97). When a child’s home culture conflicts with the expectations and culture of the school, a cultural clash called cultural mismatch occurs (Eggen & Kauchak, 2010, p. 97). Cultural mismatches can lead to any number of misperceptions such as members of one cultural group viewing members of a different cultural group as rude, slow, or disrespectful (Woolfolk, 2004, p. 162). Sometimes cultural mismatches lead teachers to make incorrect assumptions about the parents of their minority students, concluding that the parents don’t value schooling or are unsupportive of the teacher and their efforts, though research consistently indicates that this is not only untrue, but that these parents care deeply for their children and believe that their children’s success in school is extremely important (Eggen & Kauchak, 2010, p. 100). Parents don’t always know how to help their children succeed or how their home cultures influence learning (Eggen & Kauchak, 2010, p. 101). In the case of gender-role identity, parents often reinforce gender-based differences and stereotypes (Woolfolk, 2004, p. 170). For example, both parents tend to roughhouse more with sons than daughters. At first, parents tend to touch male infants more often than females, later reversing this tendency in the toddler stage (Woolfolk, 2004, p. 170). Parents are also more likely to reinforce assertive behavior in males and emotional sensitivity in females (Woolfolk, 2004, p. 170). Through these interactions with parents, as well as with other family, peers, teachers, and the general environment, children begin to form ideas about what it means to be male or female;
these ideas are called “gender schemas” and may prevent members of both sexes from exploring behaviors “outside” their newly formed beliefs about what is appropriate for their gender (Woolfolk, 2004, p. 170). Gender schemas may result in gender stereotypes or gender biases—different views of males and females, often favoring one gender over the other (Woolfolk, 2004, p. 171). A common gender stereotype is that girls are not as good as boys in the subjects of math and science (Eggen & Kauchak, 2010, p. 110). This perception can have a powerful effect on career choices, as demonstrated by the research that shows that girls are much less likely than boys to major in math, physics, engineering, and computer science in college (Eggen & Kauchak, 2010, p. 110).

Stereotypes, along with low status, and a long term history of separatism can also have negative effects for minority groups, particularly in the classroom (Eggen & Kauchak, 2010, p. 98-99). One of the negative outcomes of these influences occurs when a minority group defends themselves by forming a resistance culture, a culture with beliefs, values, and behaviors that reject the values of mainstream culture (Eggen & Kauchak, 2010, p. 98). This new culture, particularly among its young members, can gain strength in its opposition of dominant society and causes more alienation between the resistance and mainstream cultures (Anderson, 1999, p. 318). Another common result is called “stereotype threat,” a feeling of anxiety experienced by a group resulting from a concern that they might confirm a stereotype (Eggen & Kauchak, 2010, p. 99). Research indicates that performance can be adversely affected through the heightened anxiety characteristic of stereotype threat (Eggen & Kauchak, 2010, p. 99); studies also show that the long-term effects of stereotype threat can lead to a student rejecting success in the
form of exerting little effort, claiming not to care, or becoming withdrawn (Woolfolk, 2004, p. 168).

**Gender and Cultural Differences and their Effect on the Student: Summary**

As demonstrated above, gender and cultural differences play a considerable role in how a student performs and responds in the classroom, and can have long-term effects that may follow the student for the rest of their life. This section will summarize the negative effects of gender and cultural differences as they relate to the student.

Negative effects that correspond to gender include the tendency for teachers to call on girls less often than boys, wait longer for a boy’s answer, engage boys more often when they call out, and give feedback of a lesser quality to girls than to boys; parents tend to reinforce gender-based stereotypes in their children through their different expectations and interaction with their children; additional environmental influences also reinforce these stereotypes, instilling a perception in the student that can effect life decisions and limit achievement and success (Woolfolk, 2004).

Like girls, minority group boys often receive less attention from teachers (Woolfolk, 2004, p. 172); students with cultural backgrounds different from the school culture may face cultural mismatches where they and their family are misunderstood by their peers and teachers (Eggen & Kauchak, 2010, p. 97); minority stereotypes combined with other factors can result in the minority group formation of a resistance culture and further alienation (Anderson, 1999, p. 318); feelings of anxiety may be experienced by members of a minority group worried about confirming a stereotype (Eggen & Kauchak, 2010, p. 99).
Positive Responses to Gender and Cultural Differences: The Teacher

There are many negative effects associated with gender and cultural differences, but there are also many things teachers can do to combat these negative effects and enrich the lives of all their students. For instance, research shows that when teachers become aware of gender-biased behaviors in their teaching and alter these behaviors to reflect equitable instructional practices, gender gaps in interaction diminish (Zittleman, n.d.). Teachers who communicate positive expectations for all students, make individual improvement the theme of their teaching, and emphasize the role of hard work and effort in success minimize the negative effects of stereotype threat (Eggen & Kauchak, 2010, p. 99); connecting minority group learners to minority role models also helps to decrease the cultural gaps in education, providing evidence that students can both succeed in the school and mainstream cultures and honor the value and integrity of their home culture (Eggen & Kauchak, 2010, p. 99). John Ogbu, a prominent researcher in the area of resistance cultures, called the process of succeeding in mainstream culture while retaining cultural identity “accommodation without assimilation” (as cited in Eggen & Kauchak, 2010, p. 98). He encouraged teachers to help students through this process, decreasing the likelihood of a resistance culture being formed (Eggen & Kauchak, 2010, p. 98).

There are also more specific strategies teachers can follow to overcome differences in gender and culture, and provide the best education for every student. When teaching culturally diverse students, teachers should communicate a respect for all cultures and their contributions to the classroom, involve all students in learning activities, use concrete examples as reference points for language development, and target important vocabulary with opportunities for each student to practice language
When responding to gender difference, teachers should communicate openly with students about gender issues and concerns, eliminate gender bias in instructional activities, and present students with nonstereotypical role models (Eggen & Kauchak, 2010, p. 110).

**Conclusion**

When considering gender and cultural differences, it is important to remember that most available research focuses on only one variable, but real students are members of many groups (Woolfolk, 2004, p. 156). Also, these differences only describe patterns, and numerous differences can exist within the groups (Eggen & Kauchak, 2010, p. 96). Knowing the differences associated with a particular group will not give teachers a definitive method of instruction and interaction to follow with all members of a group, but will help them to make the best possible choices for each of their students in the classroom.

Gender and cultural differences exist and play a significant role in classroom achievement and success, and teachers unaware of these differences promote learning inequality. When teachers consistently call on male students more often than females, they are conveying a hidden message that men are brighter and more capable than women (W. Sue & Sue, 2008, p. 111). A teacher who over-simplifies instruction because a culturally different student did not respond in a manner consistent with the classroom may be instilling feelings of inferiority in the student as the result of a cultural mismatch (Woolfolk, 2004, p. 162). Gender and cultural differences are relevant to all subjects and all students (Woolfolk, 2004, p. 155), but research suggests that schools are not
effectively addressing these differences (Eggen & Kauchak, 2010, p. 109). Effective schools are a reflection of the teachers who work in them (Eggen & Kauchak, 2010, p. 116). Effective teachers are aware of the differences in their students and do what is necessary to ensure student success.
References


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