Creating Gender-Friendly Middle School Classrooms

Use this model to help develop a Gender Aware Classroom that provides a stimulating learning environment for both boys and girls.

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Watch the boys and girls in your middle school class. Do they learn the same way? Do they interact with you and each other similarly? Do they solve problems—both relationship and academic—the same? There appear to be real differences between boys and girls. If there is such a striking difference, what are the things we should be doing in the classroom to accommodate these differences?

Strategies to Make Gender-Friendly Classrooms

Making gender-friendly classrooms is merely good teaching, using sensitivity and brain-friendly strategies. In fact, many of the strategies discussed in this article you are already doing. The difference lies in the purposeful selection of strategies that meet the strengths of the learners while also finding ways to strengthen the weaker areas. So, as you use a strategy that might be “male-friendly,” you are working with the strength of the males and, at the same time, providing opportunities for females to strengthen a weak area, and vice versa. The professional trick is to make sure that two things also occur: that you are providing the support needed for those working in the weak area; and that you change the focus often so that everyone gets an equal chance to work in a strong area.

I have developed the model below that may be useful to view gender-friendly classrooms. This model is based on three areas you must consider when creating a Gender Aware Classroom: curriculum; instruction; and environment. Making your classroom comfortable for both boys and girls requires sensitivity in each area.

Gender Aware Curriculum

We have heard for many years the gender implications of the subjects we teach. Have you considered that nearly half of the students who enter a classroom are feeling unsure or even ill-equipped to do well with a particular core subject?

Reading. Boys generally have more trouble reading than do girls. There are several strategies that might help. Girls and boys prefer different types of reading material. Most of the reading used in schools is selected by female teachers and often has a decided female slant. Boys prefer nonfiction (Brozo 2002; Connell and Gunzelmann 2004). In addition, boys like to read humor books, magazines of interest to them, Web sites, and graphic or action-oriented reading (Scieszka n.d.). Another boy-friendly reading strategy is to give them more choice about what they read (Muir 2001). In fact, this strategy is a good one to use with girls,
Advisory Time. As young adolescents move into middle school, they are well into their quest to determine their gender roles within society. Given the enormous media influences they receive on what makes a man or a woman, they have a tough task ahead. Advisory time is a perfect time to discuss and critique gender stereotypes. This time also allows students to look critically at issues such as sexual harassment and homophobia (Butler and Manning 1998).

Gender Aware Instructional Delivery

The most critical element to creating a gender-friendly middle school classroom is the use of differentiated instruction. The effectively differentiated classroom is, by definition, gender-friendly. In the gender-friendly classroom, understanding how gender can influence such things as reading fluency, organization, and social competencies is critical. The teacher must know the learning potential of each student.

Grouping. Cooperative learning is a gender-friendly strategy. Because communication is a key element in effective cooperative groups, girls are very comfortable (Gurian and Ballew 2003). A well-designed group activity that places adolescent girls in leadership positions also provides opportunities for them to take risks. Typically, girls are afraid to take a social risk that might compromise a relationship (Babcock and Laschever 2003). Therefore, teachers must help girls see that they are learning a life skill by becoming assertive leaders.

Boys can function equally as well in cooperative groups. There may be management issues if the activity is not well structured, but by designing the project with an adequate number of parts and tasks, and providing roles for each member of the group, misbehavior can be redirected. Boys can learn to negotiate and communicate, skills in short supply for most middle school males.

Graphic Organizers. Boys prefer spatial activities since they are right-brain dominant and this function is controlled from that hemisphere. Graphic organizers are spatial models (e.g., Venn diagrams, webs, and other graphic representations) that help students make sense of complex material. Girls might prefer a more traditional activity, such as taking notes or reading about a topic, but they can benefit by seeing other ways to represent concepts.

Note-Taking. Note-taking has also taken on a gender characteristic in that there is an assumption that girls are better at this task than boys. Here is a suggestion to improve class note-taking skills: Have one student be the class note-taker for the day. When the day’s lesson is particularly important, select a good note-taker of either gender. The notes can be duplicated and distributed to all the class members. This allows poor note-takers to see how good notes are taken. Rotate this task throughout the week. Give the weaker students support through the use of outlines or other graphic devices. The note-taker, whether male or female, always feels empowered and important, and is encouraged to improve the skill (Gurian and Ballew 2003).

Variety and Movement Strategies. The human brain loves variety; changing activities stimulates the brain and aids learning. There is compelling evidence suggesting that movement actually helps students retain learned material. Sousa (2001) presents recent research that shows direct connections between movement and cognitive learning. And Wormeli (2001) uses beach balls, colored chalk, drama, and calisthenics to stimulate learning in his classroom.

Gender Aware Environment

In 1992, the American Association of University Women (AAUW) found that teachers frequently used calling on students in class as a management tool. As a result, boys were called on more often than girls. Teachers must use more gender-friendly practices and call on genders equally. Gilbert (2001) suggests using Popsicle sticks with students’ names on them to randomly call on students. This technique takes any gender issue away and allows the teacher to see who has been called on and who has not.

Beyond this equal attention to all learners, however, teachers also must make sure that the
quality of their response to the learner is equitable. Studies show that when responding to boys, teachers often prompt the boys, encourage them to go farther, and have them clarify thinking more so than with girls (AAUW 1992). Allow students more think time before accepting an answer and use strategies that encourage all learners to express themselves orally.

**Gender Examples.** Watch the use of gender-specific examples in the classroom. Middle school teachers often try to hold boys’ interest by using sports or transportation examples. Certainly, many girls are also sports enthusiasts today, but there is a gender bias in the constant use of these examples. Looking at teen magazines will give you an idea of the teen culture of both genders and provide appropriate examples you can use.

**Role Models.** Using role models in classrooms can also help to break the stereotypes young adolescents see in the media. Female business owners, scientists, computer specialists, and entrepreneurs abound. It may be more difficult, however, to find good models of males who hold typical female jobs, but it is equally as important.

**Classroom Environment.** Check your bulletin boards to see if they are heavily weighted toward typical boy roles (e.g., sports) or are they girl-oriented (e.g., use of color or themes such as flowers). Bulletin boards are a great opportunity to provide both genders with role models.

Making your middle school classroom more gender-friendly is something every effective teacher can and should do. With a little awareness and perhaps some reflection on the ways you send gender messages, you can create a stimulating learning environment for every student. Being purposeful in the selection of methods and materials will send messages to boys and girls that they are indeed different from one another. They are different but equally intelligent, equally important, and equally cared for in our schools.

**References**


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