

Principal

Web Exclusive

March/April 2009

Gender Awareness: The Key to Reducing Discipline Referrals

Boys need teaching strategies that recognize their distinctive learning styles.

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A recent survey of school principals found that only one of three believed that their teachers were very well or moderately well prepared for maintaining classroom order (Education Schools Project, 2006). This statistic is not surprising in light of the large number of referrals faced by principals on a daily basis. The time spent on inappropriate student behavior, discipline referrals, and the concomitant administrative action eats into the principal's day. Minimizing these distractions would afford principals more time to focus on other significant challenges.

Numerous benefits also accrue to teachers and students when referrals are effectively minimized:

- Fewer classroom disruptions;
- Improved academic engagement time;
- Higher student concentration and motivation;
- Improved academic performance and test scores;
- Safer learning environments; and
- Reduced stress and burnout for teachers.

The Trouble With Boys

Look inside any classroom and you will probably notice that boys are more likely than girls to fidget, tap pencils, distract others, and disrupt instruction. They also are less likely to pay attention, complete assignments, and learn. As a result, they end up in the principal's office for disciplinary reasons at significantly higher rates than girls (Lietz & Gregory, 1978; Skiba, Peterson, & Williams, 1997). According to Gurian (2006), boys represent 85 percent of discipline referrals. Because of these disproportionate rates, the most effective way to reduce the number of referrals to the office is to focus on strategies for dealing with boys.

Why do boys misbehave? Most problems result from boys who find school boring, frustrating, or overwhelming. These stu-

dents act out because they are not engaged (McGarity & Butts, 1984; Tobin & Capie, 1980). Therefore, a strategy for reducing boys' discipline referrals would be to find ways to engage them in learning.

Paradoxically, minimizing classroom disruptions caused by boys also benefits girls. In order to learn, girls need the classroom to be significantly quieter than do boys (Pizzo, Dunn, & Dunn, 1990), who are less distracted by noise than are girls (Elliot, 1971). In fact, boys are not distracted by decibel levels that are roughly 10 times higher than those that distract girls. Hence, classroom disruptions tend to distract girls more than boys.

More Action, Less Talk

While Rodin's sculpture *The Thinker* is a masterpiece, its image does not reflect the way that boys learn best; however, it does reflect the way that boys are currently being taught. In modern classrooms, boys spend much of their time sitting still and passively listening to a teacher lecture. This practice runs counter to boys' biological tendency to be active (Restak, 1979).

Unlike *The Thinker*, boys need to be active to think best. To get a boy to verbalize his thoughts or work out a problem, give him something spatial-mechanical to do. It might be squeezing a stress ball, building something, or simply walking around the room. A teacher set on engaging boys in learning can succeed by making lessons experiential and kinesthetic. Ideal lesson plans would include hands-on learning opportunities that enable boys to learn by doing. For example, boys might design and build a model, conduct an experiment, debate other students, interview members of the community, or participate in a historical reenactment. Confucius understood boys' needs when he wrote: "I hear and I forget. I see and I remember. I do and I understand."

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Constant physical movement by the teacher also contributes to overall student engagement. Teachers who circulate around the room tend to experience fewer discipline referrals for three reasons:

- The movement itself keeps students alert and engaged;
- Students are more apt to behave when they're not quite sure where the teacher will be; and
- Circulating the room makes it easier for teachers to employ proximity, a behavior management technique in which the teacher stands inside the personal space of a potentially disruptive student.

Gender-specific Teaching

No two boys learn the same way, and no two girls learn the same way, and research has confirmed that there is a difference in the learning styles of boys and girls. While this does not mean that all boys learn the same way and all girls learn the same way, it does mean that teachers need to be aware of the two different learning styles in order to accommodate them. Some new training programs and teacher education programs are beginning to train teachers in gender-specific learning differences. As newly trained teachers engage in gender-aware practices, they are finding reductions in discipline referrals, and increases in overall student performance.

By incorporating gender awareness in instruction, principals, teachers, and students will experience the numerous benefits that accrue when discipline referrals are reduced and learning is increased.

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