

Adolescents' Perceptions of Classroom Process

Abstract

The question of whether males and females interpret their in-class educational experience similarly is the research topic in the study to be described. Through surveying sixty-three General-Level students (m=32, f=31) by questionnaire and interviewing forty-five (m=10, f=35) of these students in focus groups, it was found that Ontario adolescent girls and boys disagree on some important qualities possessed by an outstanding teacher, on the most important resources and organizational techniques to be used by those teachers, and on the relative importance of teacher qualities to other classroom resources. While both male and female students agreed that such teacher qualities as having a thorough subject knowledge and the ability to effectively communicate were very important, they differed, and sometimes quite markedly, on the importance of other teacher characteristics.

Résumé

La présente étude pose la question de savoir si les hommes et les femmes interprètent de la même façon les expériences qu'ils ont vécues en classe. Après avoir interrogé par questionnaire 63 élèves de niveau général (m=32, f=31) et soumis 45 de ces élèves (m=10, f=35) à des entrevues de groupe, on a constaté que les adolescentes et les adolescents de l'Ontario ne sont pas d'accord sur certaines des qualités importantes que doit posséder un excellent professeur, sur les ressources importantes et les moyennes organisationnels que ces professeurs doivent utiliser et sur l'importance relative des qualités d'un professeur pour les autres ressources de la classe. Même si garçons et filles s'accordent à penser qu'un professeur doit posséder une connaissance approfondie de son sujet et être capable de transmettre son savoir de façon efficace, leurs opinions divergent de façon assez marquée sur l'importance des autres caractéristiques d'un professeur.

High school girls' attitudes have been examined in relation to course choices (Gaskell, 1987; Gaskell *et al.*, 1989; Meece *et al.*, 1982; Rosenbaum, 1976), technology and social expectations (Collis, 1987), position in and expectations of the social system (Giddens, 1979; Gilligan, 1982; Gilligan *et al.*, 1990; Kostash, 1987; Porter *et al.*, 1982; Willis, 1981), expectancy of success (Horner, 1970; Mura *et al.*, 1987) and likelihood to complete the course of study (Karp, 1988). There has been relatively little gender-specific treatment of Canadian student attitudes regarding their experiences within the confines of a classroom. Even more rarely have these attitudes been assessed in terms of male and female views of the effectiveness and level of satisfaction in learning through material-, peer- or teacher-instruction. In her study of "the drop-out phenomenon," Ellen Karp (1988) identified several features of classroom life which, in the opinion of drop-outs and graduates, directly influenced their success as students. Among these were students' relationships with teachers (p. 90), teaching methods and classroom management (pp. 91, 93), and relationships with other students (p.95). But none of these factors were distinguished by gender. In fact, in drawing her conclusions about the most significant factors involved in a student's decision to leave school, she rejects gender as an important variable: ". . . little distinguishes the female drop-out from the male, particularly in terms of major reasons for the decision to leave school, aside from the obvious high percentage of females who leave school due to pregnancy" (p. 32). One might reasonably infer from this that Canadian adolescent girls and boys interpret their school experience similarly, basing their decisions on factors that have the same importance to both sexes. This assumption is supported by the fact that recent studies surveying student attitudes, for example, those on retention in a study conducted in Ontario, do not include a gender variable in their research (King *et al.*, 1988; Lawton *et al.*, 1988).

The question of whether males and females interpret their educational experience similarly became the general research topic in the study to be described. Did adolescent girls and boys agree on the qualities possessed by an outstanding teacher and on the most important resources and organizational techniques to be used by those teachers? In short, the answer was 'no' to both questions.

Methodology of the Study

Subjects and procedures

Three composite high schools were chosen on the basis of size and location. Each housed a significant number of "General Level," that is to say, non-university directed, students. All three schools had taken steps to develop innovative general level programs for these students. One school (which was urban) drew from a number of housing projects; a second school was suburban

with a largely middle-class clientele; and the third school was located in a small community outside an urban area, having a mixed rural and small town population base. All three schools were in the same board of education and participated in the study in the spring of 1990. The sixty-three students surveyed by questionnaire were all enrolled for the majority of their courses at the general level. While all students were drawn from compulsory grade ten courses, not all students were technically at the grade ten level in all, or even most, of their courses. Because of such factors as course failure and/or returning to school after a period of withdrawal, the students in the sample were spread over grades 10, 11, and 12 in the general level program. Thirty-two males and thirty-one females were surveyed.

The students' teachers (two females and two males) identified groups of eight to ten high-achieving students to be interviewed in focus groups. Five of these group interviews were held, two with students in grade ten history (one male and one female group), two with students in grade ten math (both female groups), and one with students in science (a female group). Thus, about forty-five students were interviewed in focus groups by the researcher. The students were invited to further explain selected responses from the interview sheets, and to compare the importance of one survey section to another. Notes were made during the discussion and an audiotape recorded the proceedings for later transcription and analysis. Students were assured that their involvement was voluntary and that they could choose to make no comments at all. Several students did opt for silence, but by far most participants were eager to discuss their schooling experiences with an outsider, discussing at such length that the time ran out in all but one case. The focus groups ran for about an hour. Their comments extended the survey findings, giving a student voice to many general-level adolescent concerns.

More focus groups were held with females than with males since, in every case, teachers identified more top-ranking female students than male. Since one objective of the study was to ascertain if males and females valued different elements of the classroom experience, it was considered important to permit females and males to express their views separately and at length. The focus groups were structured to draw on the most articulate element of the grade ten corps. A second research question was to establish whether classroom experience varied with the subject. The focus groups showed that males and females do interpret classroom experience differently, while subject matter did not, in students' opinions, produce different requirements in classroom procedures.

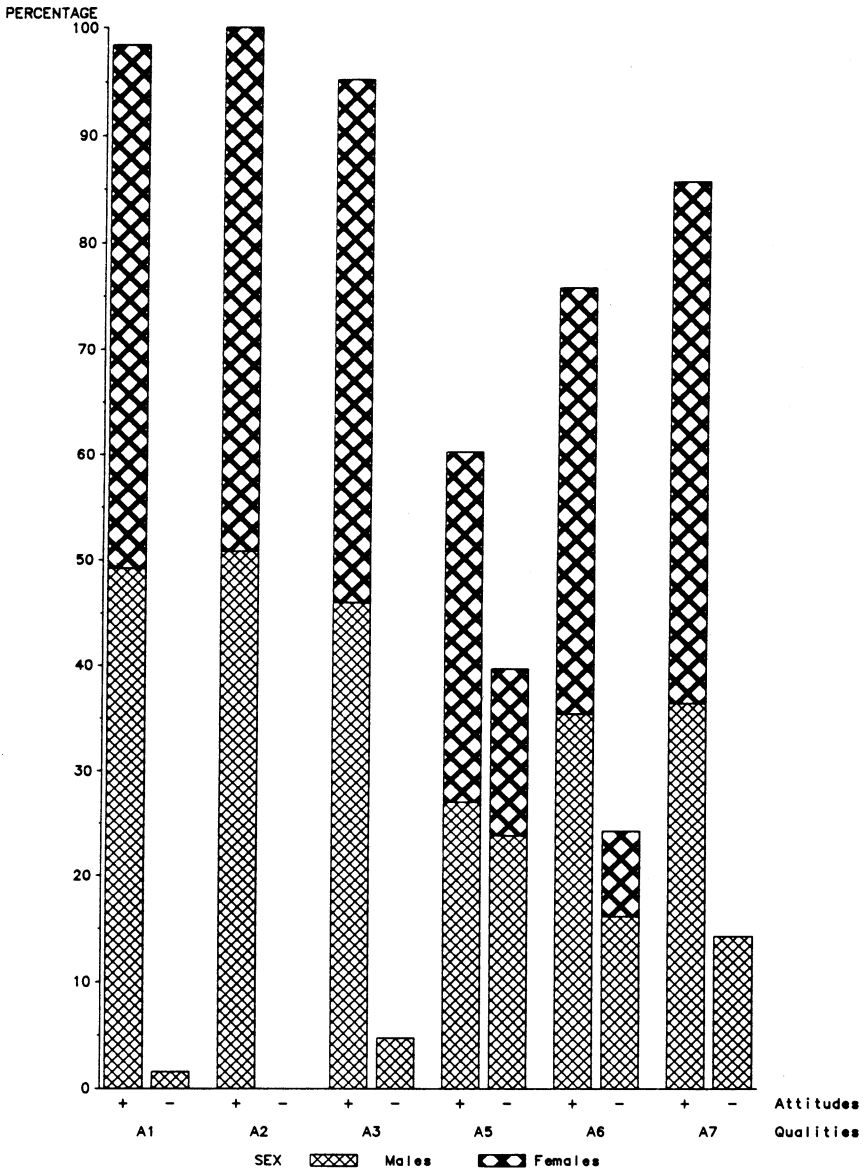
While the survey group was admittedly a select one, efforts were taken to make it representative of the schools' general level populations in all but gender. In fact, it was made clear to the researcher in all three schools that the core of the grade ten general-level class had been surveyed. Undoubtedly, the

data on female students is richer than for males with the single male focus group acting as a control.

Results

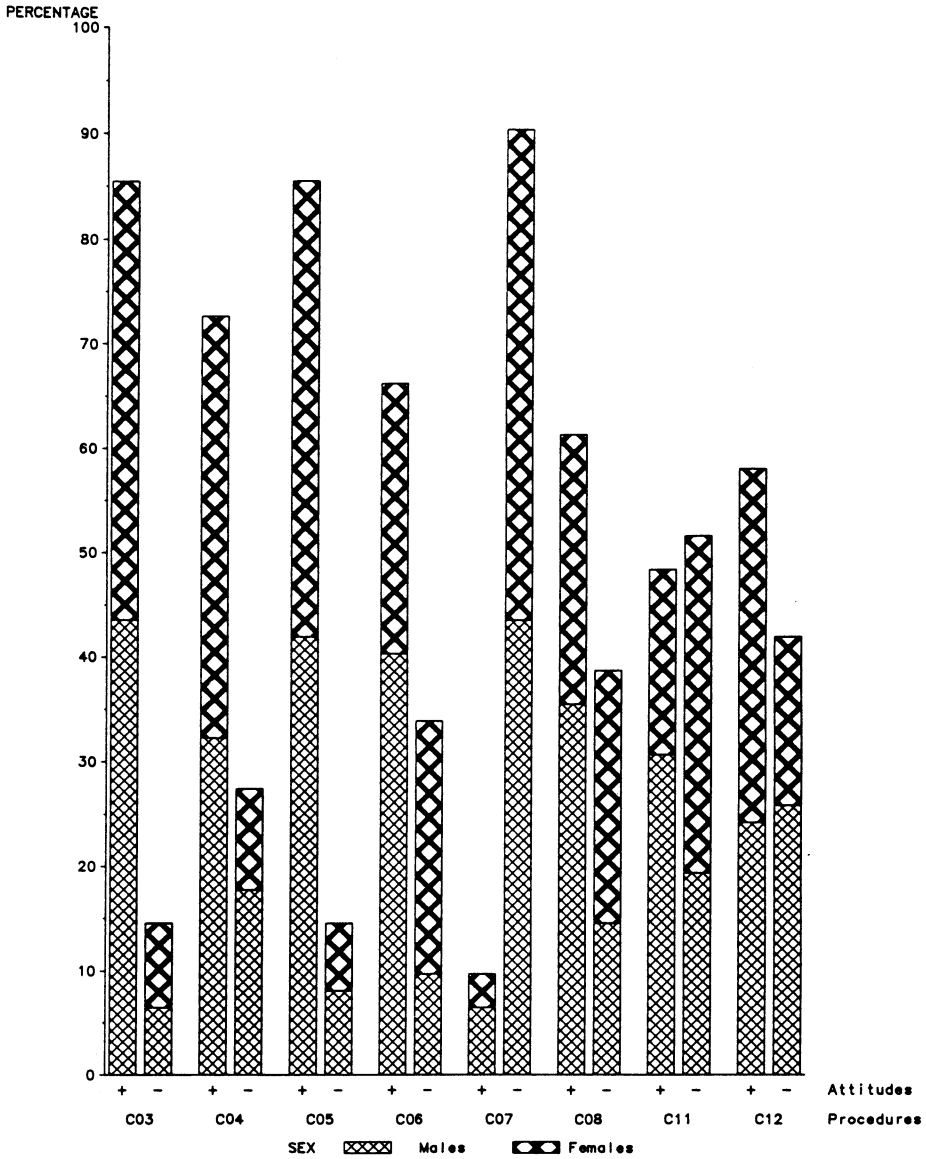
In assessing students' views of their classroom experiences, the most important variable to emerge in both questionnaire and focus discussion was that of gender. While both male and female students agreed that such teacher qualities as having a thorough knowledge of subject matter, the ability to communicate effectively, the practise of marking fairly, and the encouragement of creativity in class were very important, they differed, and sometimes quite markedly, on the importance of other teacher characteristics. (Figure 1 illustrates the cumulative scores for some of the items on which students agreed and differed. Plus [+] ratings combine responses for students who identified the item to be either 'very important' or 'somewhat important'. Negative [-] ratings combine 'not very important' and 'not at all important' responses.) For instance, female students on the questionnaire, and particularly in the focus discussions, underscored the importance of teachers' obvious respect for students. (See Figure 1, A3 for cumulative questionnaire results.) Seventy-six percent (76%) of female students as compared with 57% of male students felt teachers' respect to be 'very important'. On the issue of strictness in classroom procedures, not one male student felt this to be an important feature of a good learning climate while about 13% of the females indicated this opinion and almost 54% of females considered it 'somewhat important.' (See Figure 1, A5 for cumulative questionnaire results.) A similar difference was recorded in the matter of consistent classroom rules. About 16% of male students thought consistent rules were 'very important' while almost 26% of female students believed this. (See Figure 1, A6.) An even greater difference was recorded on the issue of the importance of opportunities to interact with one's peers: about 31% of the male students agreed that this was 'very important' while about 44% of the females considered this to be true. (See Figure 1, A7.)

Male and female students also differed in their assessment of classroom procedures. (See Figure 2 where cumulative results are calculated as in Figure 1.) For instance more than 61% of the male students surveyed indicated that audio-visual resources were very important; this view was also strongly supported by the focus discussion with male students. At the same time, about half as many girls, slightly more than 32%, felt that audio-visuals deserved such a prime designation. (See Figure 2, C3 for cumulative questionnaire results.) More males supported the notion of a shorter class length enhancing their learning than did females: about 32% as compared with 22%. (See Figure 2, C8.) Slightly more males favoured reading as opposed to writing activities (about 22%) than did females (about 13%). (See Figure 2, C11.. On the other hand, females favoured small discussion groups as a learning device more than the males: 35% of females as compared with 29% of males. (See Figure 2, C4.) Female students also favoured small class sizes to a greater degree (about 32%) than did males (about 22%). (See Figure 2, C6.)



A1: Subject Knowledge - A2: Communication - A3: Respect for Students
 A5: Strictness - A6: Consistent Rule - A7: Interaction with Peers

Figure 1
Teacher Qualities by Sex



C3: Audio-Visuals - C4: Small Discussion Groups - C5: Full-Class Discussion
 C6: Small Class Size - C7: Single Sex Classes - C8: Short Class Length
 C11: More Reading than Writing - C12: Frequent Testing

Figure 2
Classroom Procedures by Sex

Several other variables were found to discriminate between student attitudes, albeit to a more limited degree. Almost all students expected teachers of any subject to be effective communicators and to demonstrate respect for student opinions, for instance, but the subject matter did influence students' attitudes about some classroom management issues. Although few students accepted that strictness in class contributed to their learning, slightly more students accepted that strictness (about 13%) and consistent rules (almost 33%) in math class were more necessary than in history class (0% and 14%, respectively). Some subjects clearly worried these nonacademic students when offered in longer class formats. Sixty percent (60%) of the history students indicated that a short class length was very or somewhat important, while 53% of math students felt that this was not very important or not at all important.

Level of maturity was also important in the analysis of some issues. The question of the appropriate degree of classroom strictness arises here as well. Forty-three percent (43%) of grade ten students thought classroom strictness to be unimportant ("not very important" or "not at all important") while only 23% of grade eleven students indicated this view. At the same time, 67% of grade ten students favoured short class lengths, while only 43% of grade eleven students did so.

Some correlation is possible between the holding of a job and certain attitudes, although this connection is clearly more tenuous than for the other variables. For example, considerably more students holding paying jobs saw the value of consistent classroom rules (84%) than did those who did not have paid employment (64%). Similarly, more students with jobs saw the value of small discussion groups to promote learning than did those without (77% as compared to 64%).

In the focus-group discussions, the students were asked to differentiate between the importance of the first list, relating to teacher qualities, and the second, having to do with classroom procedures. All four of the female focus groups agreed that the teacher was central to their success as students; the sole male focus group indicated that classroom procedures aided their success more than the teacher. The students were further asked to distinguish the most vital qualities of a fine teacher. All five groups chose the same three features: those of subject knowledge, the ability to communicate, and demonstration of respect for their students. Where a fourth feature was chosen, focus groups opted either for consistent rules or creativity.

But it was in the focus-groups' discussions that differences in male and female interpretations of these statements were most clear. The male group argued that the essential job of the teacher was to "get stuff done," to facilitate task completion. They expressed great anxiety about passing their courses. This group, although identified by their teachers as high achievers, was

unanimous in the belief that most teachers did not like them - as a group - because as general-level students they were hard to teach. In the male students' views, this had the result that their learning was sabotaged: "... when you ask a teacher a question she won't answer you." In addition to helping students complete their courses, teachers were expected to stave off student boredom. In the course of a one-hour discussion, the word "boredom" and its variations appeared more often than any other descriptive word.

Female students, also identified by teachers as high achievers in general-level courses, spoke at length and with deep feeling about their insecurities in class. But in contrast to their male peers, the girls' anxiety centred on a desire to be accepted on a personal level by their teachers and schoolmates. They were quick to give examples of instances where they detected a lack of acceptance. In all of the female focus groups the participants wanted to discuss the area of teacher qualities to a much greater extent than classroom procedures; frequently when the interviewer pushed the discussion on to the latter topic, the female students would revert to debating teacher characteristics. Clearly, the role of the teacher is of primary interest to female students where it ranks of lesser importance to the males. One focus group insisted that a teacher's attitude, including patience, time made available for individual student help, interest in student opinions and problems, and a realistic acceptance of the student's abilities, is of such significance to them, that they "could care less if a teacher knew anything. . . ." Another group's participant said, "What I'm looking for is a teacher who listens to me and who has time for me."

Adolescent girls agreed with the males that a fine teacher must show respect for his students. But the evidence they used to identify a teacher's lack of respect was very different. Males watched for courteous, even-handed reactions by teachers, even when they were being tested by difficult students in the class. The teacher's public *personae* was repeatedly referred to in making such judgements. Females, on the other hand, were much more inclined to assess teachers according to the humanity of teachers' responses to students' personal issues and the degree to which the teacher was willing to engage them as true comrades. For example, one participant found it highly disrespectful of teachers to insist to struggling students and their parents that "[you] can do better." From the female student point of view, such common statements invalidated the student's authentic efforts in a course and suggested an unrealistic standard for the student to school administrators and parents. The assumption was made that the teacher should know better because of her training, but that she had misunderstood the student's abilities and interests through a lack of researching the student's particular characteristics. This demonstrated a lack of respect of the student's present status, suggesting that the student was lying about the amount of effort already being put into a given course or task. A second example of lacking respect was given, using classroom discussions as a case in point. When teachers solicit student opinion on an issue but refuse to

give their own, the students suggested that they were left with the message that teachers were playing a kind of game and were not honestly discussing the topic as they would, for instance, with their peers. They felt this reticence to be a slight. Thus the female approach to analyzing a positive classroom climate is one that is firmly rooted in personal interaction rather than task completion. This is consistent with research carried out with adolescent females by Carol Gilligan in single-sex classrooms (Gilligan, 1990). It appears that the same principles hold true in a coeducational setting.

Focus groups' choices of important classroom procedures were also distinguished by gender. The male group placed the importance of interesting textbooks at the top of their list with one student adding the issue of readability: "Where we have to read to pass, it's gotta be something you can understand." The female groups placed less emphasis on this, suggesting that a good teacher would use a text sparingly, and translate and underscore for them the important sections. The male group also favoured shorter classes as productive to learning: "some of us can't stick with it for long..." while female groups did not mention it as being important. The males continued to be concerned about boredom in longer classes.

Female focus groups considered in detail the value of discussion in the classroom, both in small groups and in open forum. They recognized that discussion slowed the pace, which they found to be good in itself, and permitted them to concentrate on a particular idea long enough to see differing viewpoints. As noted, they wanted these viewpoints to include the teacher's, which they believed was more likely to be voiced in a discussion period than in a formal Socratic class arrangement. Nevertheless, discussions were not seen to be without their own frustrations. Female students were quick to point out that teachers' favourites were permitted more "air time" in class discussions, and, as Sadker and Sadker (1986) have observed, that males often dominated these informal debates. Unfortunately, this knowledge did not bring with it a resolve to change the classroom dynamics. Unlike the young women whom Jane Gaskell saw manipulating the school system to their own devices, these adolescent females seemed clear-sighted about some of the problems, but demoralized in righting the disparity (Gaskell, 1987). In the end, the adolescent girls placed enormous confidence in the ability of a competent and humane classroom teacher to improve their educational experiences.

Discussion

It seems apparent from this study of adolescents' views of classroom life that young men and women interpret the importance of particular features of that experience differently. Adolescent girls depend far more on the classroom teacher than do boys to translate and transmit the required knowledge base of a subject and to create the climate of fairness, caring, and mutual trust which

these research participants considered necessary for effective learning. While males look to a variety of classroom procedures, among them interesting textbooks, shorter classes, and audio-visual aids to help them pass their courses, female adolescents place their trust primarily in the teacher as the centre of a social network within which students seek respect and support. These findings are not startling, nor are they incompatible with a wide body of literature dealing with women's fears, "ways of knowing" (Belenky, 1986), and approaches to learning (Blackstone, 1976; Chesler, 1971; Chodorow, 1971; Dowling, 1981; de Beauvoir, 1952; Marks, 1976; Smith & David, 1975). However the implications of these different perceptions have, until now, been largely ignored. The group surveyed and interviewed in the course of this research, it must be remembered, is part of that sector of the student population which is the most likely of any to drop out. Recognizing and responding to their insecurities and educational needs could make a significant impact on their rates of success as students.

If we are to take these students' comments seriously, we should consider two aspects of the educational process very carefully: teacher skills and classroom procedures. It is obvious that teachers of students who have recently been designated as "high risk" require preservice and inservice training in several areas. Competence in the subject is assumed for all teachers receiving provincial certification and is largely assured by a sufficient university concentration in the subject. Of great importance - and these students suggested of the greatest importance - in a teacher's reservoir of skills, however, is the ability and willingness to communicate clearly with adolescents, to share opinions and musings with them, and to maintain a climate of equity and acceptance. If the students in this study are representative, it is possible that some classroom procedures have a greater interest and learning potential for young women than young men and vice versa. For instance, the use of small-group work and discussion as well as full-class discussion may well have a greater appeal to females than males because of gender-specific socialization and learning styles which may or may not have a physiological origin. Classroom teachers have long recognized the greater facility and enjoyment of female students in group work over their male counterparts. Possibly this approach to student organization should be used more judiciously, particularly where males evince the pronounced competitiveness and desire for task completion as found in this research group. This is not to say that educational strategies cannot play a part in challenging students to experiment with different approaches to learning. It is, however, to caution educators about a gender variable in learning procedures which may cause males to be more resistant to group learning and discussion than is the case for females.

Finally, if we grant that females and males interpret classroom activities differently, and quite possibly acquire different messages from the same presentation, it might be argued that much of the unintended disparity will be

erased with single-sex classes. However, it should be noted that both the young women and men in our study valued the diversity of a coeducational classroom. Their common support was strongly represented both on the questionnaire and in the focus groups. Clearly, they found this to be an enriching rather than a crippling component of their education. This should serve as a further reminder that the strength and weakness of the classroom experience resides in the personal relationships of its participants, all of which can be improved through knowledge and the resolve to create a positive and humane learning climate.

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