

MONOGRAPH

LASER RESEARCH ASSOCIATE PROJECT

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Voices from the Field: The Latina Young Women's Project

I. ABSTRACT

As a faculty member of a minority institution, the LASER Research Associate grant has enabled me to engage in research with Latina students in an urban special education setting. The Latina Young Women's Project was designed to examine attitudes, perceptions, and experiences of Latina students in single-gender and coeducational secondary-level special education placements for students with mild to moderate learning disabilities. Classrooms observations and interviews were conducted with students, classroom teachers, and program administrators in both single-gender and coeducational special education classrooms on one urban school site serving a large special education population. The findings of the study indicate that the single-gender special education environment provides greater comfort levels and fewer distractions in the classroom, increased school attendance, and improved attitudes toward school than the coeducational classroom environment.

II. DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT:

Latina students in special education have the highest dropout rate for any group of girls; approximately one out of every five Latina students leave school before the age of 17 (Schnaiberg, 1998). In some urban and rural areas, 56 percent of Latina students leave school before graduation (United States Department of Education, 1999). The percentage of dropouts, prior to high school graduation, in special education by gender is 50.4 percent female and 49.6 percent male (McMillan, 1997), but these rates are deceptive because of the disproportionate number of boys in special education. Boys are six times more likely than girls to be diagnosed with learning disabilities (LD) (American Association of University Women, 1992; Epstein, Cullinan, & Bursuck, 1985). The disproportionate number of boys identified as LD has resulted in special education classes in which boys outnumber girls by startling percentages. In special education classrooms where boys consistently outnumber girls, girls take fewer risks and perform less proficiently than boys (Grossman, 1998).

Efforts to retain female special education students, particularly Latina students, have not been successful. Recently, a growing body of literature has documented the benefits of single-sex schooling in the general education setting (Datnow, Hubbard, & Conchas, 2001; Datnow, Hubbard, & Woody 2001; Datnow & Hubbard, 2000). Further, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) contains a provision that authorizes local education agencies to use educational funds to implement single-gender programs (Notice of Intent to Regulate, 2002). Studies examining outcomes for females in single-gender classrooms demonstrated greater gains, both academically and affectively, than their counterparts in mixed-gender settings (Monaco & Gaier, 1992; Posnick-Goodwin,

1997; Riordan, 1990). Nationwide, research examining the effects of ethnic group differences, in the context of single-gender settings compared to mixed-gender schools, has yielded statistically significant results for Latina and African American female students. Latina and African-American female students attending single-gender schools scored higher on measures of leadership, academic achievement, and environmental control than the comparative group of female students in mixed-gender schools (Riordan, 1994).

Single-gender education has not been examined in special education until recently (Madigan, 2003; Madigan, 2004). Research in special education rarely focuses on gender issues. The lack of research and programs focusing on the needs of girls, particularly Latinas, in special education places them at risk for failure and for dropping out of school (AAUW, 1998). While efforts to improve services provided to students of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds have been made (Baca, Fradd & Collier, 1990; Guillory, 2000; Romo, 1998), solutions must continue to be explored to address this growing problem of the Latina drop out rate in special education. Single-gender environments may provide one viable option to encourage school continuance for Latina students in special education. Through qualitative research methodology, the present study sought to give voice to female students attending single-gender and coeducational special education placements on one urban school campus serving a large number of Latina students identified as learning-disabled.

III. PARTICIPANTS

The participants for this study were nine Latina special education students who attended single-gender and coeducational special education classrooms; all participants

were in their first, second, or third year of the program, (freshman to junior year of high school). Two students attended the coeducation special education class and seven students attended the single-gender special education class. The Latina students attending the coed program were two of four female students in the classroom. The ages of the participants ranged from 15 to 18 years. Six of nine Latina participants reported that Spanish was the primary language spoken at home; the other participants spoke only English at home. Of the six Latina students who spoke Spanish at home, four were born in Mexico, one was born in El Salvador, and one was born in California. With the exception of one participant, all students lived in low income neighborhoods. Six students were from single-parent families and five students reported that either one or both parents did not graduate from high school. In addition to the students, two special education teachers (one male coed classroom teacher, one female single-gender classroom teacher), and high school administrators involved in the implementation of the single-gender and coeducational special education program were interviewed. Selection of the student participants was based on gender, ethnicity, and interest. The study was conducted on the campus of a public coeducational high school located in an urban center in northern California. The high school was one of seven in the district and had the largest special education program district-wide.

Coeducation Special Education Class

The coeducational classroom in this study was a permanent portable, with beige carpeting and vinyl walls. All student desks faced the whiteboard. The teacher's desk faced the students from the front. The teacher was a middle-aged White male with fifteen years of teaching experience. He described the students as a "tough group of kids that

have been kicked out of classes for behavior problems.” The teacher bantered frequently with the boys; the girls were largely ignored unless they spoke out. The teacher’s stated goal was to teach students life skills and manners. The girls in class were described as very “tough.” Two of the four female students in the coed class have probation officers.

Single-Gender Special Education Class

The single-gender classroom in this study was a fairly spacious permanent portable. The classroom layout was open with the teacher’s desk set off to the side and student desks arranged in clusters. The teacher was a young White female with two years of teaching experience. The teacher interacted in a relaxed fashion with the girls. The students were free to talk out and were not required to raise their hands during formal or informal discussions in class. Two of thirteen students in the single-gender class had previously attended the coed classroom and were placed in the single-gender class as a last resort to prevent the students from dropping out. One student in the class was pregnant.

IV. METHOD

The study relied on qualitative case study research methods because they enabled the researcher to examine the process and experiences of Latina students attending single gender and coeducational programs in the real life contexts in which they occur, and to present the perspectives of those actually implementing the school program (Yin, 1994). These methods included classroom observations using descriptive field notes, focus group interviews, and individual interviews (Bogdan & Bicklin, 1998). In addition, class assignments, tests, and attendance records were collected. Latina special education

students, teachers, and program administrators of single-gender and coeducational special education classrooms were interviewed.

Qualitative Instruments

Prior to this study, the researcher worked as an assistant coding qualitative data for a separate study of California's public school single-gender academies conducted through Johns Hopkins University (Datnow, Hubbard & Conchas, 2001). The interview protocols from the single-gender study were adapted with permission of Dr. Amanda Datnow for the purposes of this investigation. The protocols were piloted with three female special education students at a local private single-gender high school. The outcomes of the pilot study suggested a need for adjustments to the interview protocol. For example, several interview questions were adapted to encourage more elaboration from the participants about their experiences as females with learning disabilities. The original protocol was designed for a general education environment and did not address specific issues related to special education. The data collected from the pilot study were not used in the final analysis.

Procedures

Observations

Over the span of four months, the researcher and a trained student field researcher observed in both coeducational and single-gender classrooms two days a week (four hours per visit) as a participant/observers resulting in more than 25 classroom observations. In addition to instructional time, the observations included lunchtime, breaks, and before- and after-school interactions. The purpose of the observations was three-fold: to establish rapport and help build relationships with the students and

classroom teachers; to observe interactions on two levels: student-to-student interactions and student-to-teacher interactions; and to observe the classroom behaviors and attitudes of the students.

Focus Group and Individual Interviews

Latina students from single-gender and coeducational special education classrooms were interviewed in focus groups of three to four participants according to class configuration (single-gender or coeducational). A transcription from each interview was generated to record the responses. Interview questions addressed the research questions pertaining to the school attitudes of students. The researcher also conducted individual interviews with students to clarify information collected from the initial focus group interviews.

Data Analysis

Initially, the transcribed data from the interviews were coded according to the emergent themes that arose from the focus groups and individual interviews. Hyperresearch® was used to analyze the qualitative data. With this tool, the researcher was able to document the types of dialog and discourse that examined the process of single-gender and coeducational special education schooling for girls in the contexts in which they occurred. Further, transcription allowed content analysis of the interviews to be used for developing generalized themes which addressed the research questions. Follow-up individual interviews with the students were conducted at a later date as a method for member checking and to further explore emergent themes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

In order to support the validity and credibility of the findings, a variety of

triangulation methods was employed. A range of data sources were used in the study. Different people representing various status positions were interviewed. These included Latina students with mild to moderate disabilities, special education teachers of single-gender and coeducational classrooms, and program administrators. Additionally, participant observations were conducted by two evaluators; a trained student field researcher and the principal investigator. Finally, multiple methods were utilized, including individual and focus group interviews, and classroom observations.

During the final phase of data analysis, the transcribed interviews, field notes, and documents were organized according to dates, classroom configuration, and individual and focus group interviews. The researcher revisited the data to get a sense of the overall picture emerging from the various information sources. The data were organized into three categories related to students' experiences, attitudes and perceptions toward school (See Figure 1). The data were labeled and indexed to organize the material into meaningful and manageable themes within the three categories. Detailed descriptions and in-depth quotations were included to provide understanding and insights into the themes that arose throughout the data analysis process. The notes collected from the classroom observations also provided information related to the classroom behaviors and school attitudes of the students, and were coded thematically.

V. FINDINGS

The interview data were organized into three categories related to students' attitudes and perceptions toward school (See Figure 1). School attitudes and perceptions were measured by general affective statements indicating positive, negative or neutral feelings toward school reported in focus group and individual interviews. Attitudes and

perceptions included relationships among students, teachers, and peers, student attitudes about academics, student perceptions of the school environment, and student perceptions of gender and identity. Figure 1 provides an overview of the separate categories and themes that were content analyzed.

Figure 1: School Attitudes and Perceptions by Category and Theme: Single

Gender/Coed Classroom

I. Relationships	II. Academics	III. Perceptions
1. Student: Peers	1. School Attendance	1. Comfort / Distractions
2. Student: Teachers	2. Grades	2. Gender / Ethnicity

Category I: Relationships

Peer Relationships

Several trends emerged from the interviews with students in the single-gender special education classroom. Students generally reported positive relationships with same-sex peers in class. They commented repeatedly about the freedom they felt to discuss personal issues, and the lack of inhibition they felt to ask questions, to participate in class, and to stand up during presentations in front of their female peers.

This was a contrast to the descriptions of students' previous experiences in coed environments. The students in the single-gender class reported feeling very intimidated in coed environments. When attending coed classes, students were afraid to ask questions for fear of being ridiculed by male peers and were reluctant to participate in class discussions. The company of all female peers was described as being comfortable and

safe. Two Latina students reported feeling “shy” in front of male students for two reasons: the fear of being laughed at and teased and the fear of not fluently speaking English. This fear was heightened by the fact that these students were in classes in which they were outnumbered by boys. Several students in the single-gender class commented about the benefits of mainstreaming for two or more classes as an opportunity to interact with male peers. Students agreed that they missed the company of boys, however, most students agreed that the time spent in the single-gender classroom was the most productive and enjoyable in terms of relationships.

Student-Teacher Relationships

Single-gender and coed classroom students made a clear distinction between relationships with male and female teachers. Seven of nine Latina students interviewed indicated a preference for female teachers for three reasons: 1) students receive more attention from a female teacher in class, 2) students are not afraid to ask for help from a female teacher, and 3) students feel more comfortable talking about personal issues with a female teacher.

Overall, Latina students in the single-gender classroom reported getting along better with female teachers and felt that male teachers did not understand their specific needs in the classroom. The coed classroom students agreed with this sentiment and indicated that they did not feel they had much in common with their male teachers.

Category II: Academics

Attendance and Grades

Students in the single-gender special education classroom reported improved attendance compared to previous years in coed classes. Teacher records and teacher and

student interviews indicate that, overall, attendance is higher for female students in the single-gender classroom compared with their counterparts in the coed classrooms.

Student grades and attitude toward school work revealed similar patterns to the rates of attendance, academic achievement, and class participation for girls in the single-gender class. Teacher grade books, and teacher and student interviews demonstrated a positive trend in school attitude, grade point average, and performance in Latina single-gender classroom students. Attendance for female students in the coed class was a serious problem. During the twelve-week period of data collection, the Latina students were frequently absent during observations, and one Latina was on probation for truancy. One Latina student was eventually expelled from class for truancy and referred to a continuation high school. According to the coed classroom teacher, lack of attendance is the greatest obstacle for Latina students achieving high school graduation.

Category III: Perceptions

Comfort Level / Distractions

Students in the single-gender special day class commented repeatedly on the degree of comfort they experienced in the all-female environment. In two focus groups with single-gender classroom students, this theme emerged consistently. Students in the coed class, on the other hand, expressed feeling tense and guarded. It seemed that the coed classroom students experienced the environment in terms of “us and them;” the girls felt they had to defend themselves against the boys’ harassment. The coed teacher viewed the girls as tough and able to stand up to the boys.

Distractibility was another recurrent theme for girls in the single-gender and coed classes. Girls in the single-gender and coed classes perceived themselves as motivated to

stay on task and focus on schoolwork while in class. The girls in both classrooms expressed frustration and discomfort with the continuous teasing from boys. It appeared that girls were not distracted by the presence of boys in the classroom; rather the boys' behaviors towards them created a struggle for the girls to remain focused.

Gender / Ethnicity

The discussion of perceptions and attitudes toward gender and ethnicity raised a new discussion of challenges and stereotypes facing Latina students. Students articulated awareness of societal perceptions regarding their gender in relationship to ethnicity. The messages girls in this study internalized and expressed about gender from teachers and peers were complicated and contradictory. Girls were encouraged by some teachers to set high goals and to believe in themselves. On the other hand, they experienced put downs from peers on the basis of their disability and gender. During our classroom observations there was often no intervention on the part of teachers to deal with these behaviors. Gender identity is a complicated issue for Latina students in single-gender and coed classrooms that merit further investigation.

Single-Gender Special Education

Single-gender special education was viewed overall as an affirming and positive experience for Latina students in a safe and comfortable environment. Latina students in the single-gender special education classroom reported increased school attendance, higher grades, and improved attitudes toward school. These self-reports are confirmed by teachers and program administrators, as well as teacher records. Coed classroom Latina students, on the other hand, reported lower attendance, and higher incidences of truancy. This information is verified by teachers and administrators, and teacher records.

Support from teachers and parents as another important benefit of single-gender classroom attendance. This particular group of students reported very strong support from home and school. Latina students attending the single-gender special education classroom appeared to be advantaged in single-gender environments. The students interacted in class with greater frequency, attended school more often, and experienced greater academic success than the Latina students attending the coed classroom. Single-gender environments appear to be empowering for Latina students for three reasons: the absence of boys gives them more confidence to speak out and participate, the single-gender environment is less distracting, and the Latina students report feeling greater support from teachers and parents.

VI. DISCUSSION

Student-Teacher Connections

Overall, single-gender classroom students reported favorable experiences with female teachers in single-gender classes and positive relationships with their peers. Girls in the coed classroom did not feel they had much in common with their male teacher, and as a result of this perception, they generally preferred a female teacher. Datnow, Hubbard, and Woody (2001), however, suggest that when teachers share similar background experiences with their students, the impact transcends the common bond of gender and race. Datnow et al. (2001) argue that the teachers' ability to relate to the experiences of their students and teacher-student rapport has the greatest influence on students. Furthermore, in their study of single-gender academies, the researchers found that gender match between students and teachers was not a sufficient explanation of teacher effectiveness. Overall, Datnow and colleagues found that regardless of gender,

students and teachers in single-sex classrooms engaged in more meaningful conversations, and that more of these dialogs took place with female teachers in all female classes.

The research of Datnow et al. (2001) illuminates the findings of this study. The female teacher in the single-gender classroom shared a common bond with her students in terms of life experiences. She is married to a Latino and had a child at a young age. She demonstrated empathy for her students and advocated for them in and out of school. The male coed classroom teacher, on the other hand, had little in common with his female students. He felt better able to relate to male students and often sided with his male students when gender differences arose in class, which further alienated the female students. It is not surprising that, in this study, Latina students in single-gender special education classrooms experienced a greater degree of positive relationships with the teacher and their peers. This positive finding, however, cannot be attributed solely to the gender of the teacher, but to a range of teacher characteristics.

Ginorio and Huston (2001) associated high achievement in school of Latina students with a high degree of personal connections with teachers. A report from the San Diego City Schools on high-achieving and low-achieving Latina students connected high “personalism,” or strong personal connections between teachers and students, as directly related to the success of Latina students in school (San Diego City Schools, 1989).

Academic Attitudes

In this study, academic attitudes were evidenced in school attendance and grades of students in single-gender and coed classrooms. Teacher records and student interviews indicated that students attending the single-gender classroom had markedly higher

attendance rates and grades than their coed class counterparts. Truancy and academic failure is a chronic problem for girls attending the coed special education class.

According to one program administrator, this issue was the initial reason for the start up of the single-gender program on the research site. The goal of the single-gender program on the research site was to address the specific problems of girls in the special education program. The positive outcomes for students in key areas such as school attendance and academic achievement have been documented by the special education administrator and the program has continued to yield successful results for the female students in single-gender classrooms. The girls in the coed classrooms continue to suffer from low attendance and poor academic performance.

Distractions and Harassment

Distraction emerged as a major theme throughout this research. Students in single-gender and coed classes commented repeatedly on the increased distractions they experienced in the presence of boys. This distraction was portrayed by the girls as unwanted and disliked. They described being harassed and picked on by boys when attempting to focus on schoolwork. Girls in the single-gender class appreciated the respite from males and preferred class without them. Girls in the coed class described the distractions from male peers as menacing and a source of frustration. Little was done on the part of the teacher to prevent these behaviors. Datnow et al. (2001) discuss the problem of male harassment of girls on an institutional level. They report that the female students in their study felt that teachers did little to stop the harassment, except to tell the girls to ignore the boys' behavior. In their study, girls in the single-gender academies

reported a freedom from the distraction of the opposite sex, thereby allowing an opportunity for greater academic focus.

Classroom Climate

The students in the single-gender class remarked with consistency on the comfort level they experienced in their classroom. This finding is not surprising given the dynamics that take place between male and female students in coed special education classrooms. Coed classroom students felt very guarded in class for various reasons, including the need to defend themselves against the boys, and the lack of support and attentiveness to their needs from the male teacher. In the 1992 report by the American Association of University Women (AAUW), *How Schools Shortchange Girls*, researchers reported that male students receive more positive and negative attention than females from teachers in the classroom. This atmosphere places girls at risk for negligence, underachievement, and ultimately dropping out (AAUW, 1992). These findings are clearly reflected in the experiences of the coed special education classroom students in this present study.

Parental Support of Education

The role of parents in the school success of Latina students is multi-faceted and at times, misunderstood. In general, Latino parents place high value on their children's education and strongly support achievement in school (Huston, Ginorio, Frevert, & Bierman, 1996). Latino parents also have high expectations for their children to commit to family; which may sometimes be interpreted as a lack of commitment to education. To the contrary, Latino parents view academic achievement of their children as an opportunity for a better life with benefits for the whole family (Ginorio & Huston, 2001).

The role of teachers and parental support cannot be underestimated for Latina students, particularly Latinas in special education. The findings of this study suggest that single-gender special education classrooms provide distinct benefits for Latina students in terms of overall school success.

VII. SUMMARY

The small sample size of the student participants, and the teachers' gender and teaching styles are clear limitations of this study. It is important to note that the coeducational classroom had only two female participants and the single gender classroom consisted of seven female participants. Thus, the results are not generalizable. Additionally, a closer look at the complexities of gender, background experiences, and instructional styles of educators is suggested by this investigation. Datnow et al. (2001) pointed out that while students in their study agreed that it was important to have a teacher who was the same sex, teacher background played a vital role in the success of student teacher relationships. An important recommendation from this study would be for administrators to carefully consider background experiences of teachers, in conjunction with gender and ethnicity, when making decisions for the staffing of single-gender and coed special education classrooms.

The results of this investigation support the contention that Latina students need a high degree of support and personal connection with teachers, in addition to positive reinforcement, to achieve optimal school success (Ginorio & Huston, 2001; San Diego City Schools, 1989). Single-gender programs provide such environments for students who attend them (Datnow et al., 2001; Streitmatter, 1999). Additionally, the role of parents plays an important part in the school achievement and attendance of Latina

students (Ginorio & Huston, 2001). This study suggests that teachers and program administrators of Latina students in special education pay careful attention to the personal relationships they cultivate with their students and families. For Latina students, personal connections with teachers play a vital role in school success. In this study, single-gender special education classes provided such an opportunity for teachers.

The present study supports the notion that single-gender special education placements appear to be a viable option for Latina students to meet their complex and diverse needs in special education. In light of the fact that female students in special education are largely understudied, it is critical that future research provides further examination along this line of inquiry on the status and condition of female students, particularly Latinas, identified with mild to moderate learning disabilities.

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