
Single Sex Instruction in a Public High School for 9th Grade World History Students

Single sex instruction in public schools has arrived. For many educators who have looked beyond traditional pedagogical paradigms to facilitate learning and age appropriate development of middle adolescence this is a trend whose time has come. The Title Nine provision of the federal No Child Left Behind Act allowed schools to divide classes by gender beginning in 2006 and opened the floodgates of educator and school district experimentation in numbers that have exploded since this ruling was handed down. As part of ETLP, Cedar Ridge High School in Hillsborough has implemented the single sex instructional model in select World History classes with the view towards formal implementation based, in part, on favorable results of the ongoing study. For Cedar Ridge's History Department, and specifically the faculty comprising the World History PLC, the early results have been positive and startling.

Preparation for full implementation began with ad-hoc gender separation through cooperative learning projects during the Fall and early Winter of the 2008-09 academic year. Content heavy projects that required students to complete various written and sundry other responsibilities in cooperative gender segregated groups was implemented on 5 occasions throughout the 1st Semester. Another component to our experiment was that in separating by gender we were compelled to mix honors and non-honors cohorts based on scheduling issues that we were powerless to alter. Little did we know that this mixing of students by ability would cause a greater ripple of fear and consternation by some parents (when we implemented the model more fully in the following semester) than the separation of classes based solely on gender. Nonetheless, anonymous student surveys completed after the 5th project yielded mixed results in that some students "thought it was ok" but would not favor an entire semester whereas others stated various supportive comments that indicated surprise as to liking this method of learning. Follow up focus group interviews revealed that for the students who liked attending class this way they believed they did better on the projects and were more focused in completing tasks without the distractions inherent to traditional coed classrooms. Girls especially were more favorably inclined to learning this way in that with most group projects boys generally "don't pull their own weight". Researcher field notes and interviews with the cooperating teacher reveal a substantive environmental change that was positive regardless of student support or opposition to the model. Most notably it was reported that classroom management issues virtually disappeared and discussions relative to the content were more engaging while incorporating greater participation from students who generally prefer not to participate in classroom discussions. With the results as they were, and with the permission of the administration, we added another faculty member to our midst and decided to more fully and formally implement the model in the second semester. In order to live up to the letter of the directive we began the semester with 2 weeks of traditional coed teaching and then separated the students by gender beginning in week 3.

Although the word had been out about the “things they were doing in some world history classes” there was little expectation by this group of 9th graders that full implementation for 7 consecutive weeks was the ultimate plan of action. Anonymous surveys were distributed and passed out to all the classes after being told that this model was more long term this semester than was done last semester and the results were generally hostile. “This is stupid”, “I can’t believe we have to do this”, or “this is not the real world” generally summarize the pre-model survey responses. Our faculty chairman commented that in his view he saw a combination of resignation and hostility when he spoke to one class urging them to keep an open mind about this experiment. A follow up anonymous survey taken 4 weeks later was revealing and positive for the most part. Parents were also encouraged to comment in a letter sent home with students requesting their anonymous input. Only 11 parents responded and only one expressed any explicit opposition. This particular parent expressed concern that if this model were adopted his daughter would not be prepared to work in a world with men as her superior and thus he/she opposed this experiment based on “the possibility of damaging long term effects” when his/her child entered the workforce. The other parental input was generally supportive (a few enthusiastically) and most were interested in the results of the student survey (although of those, all forgot to leave me contact info).

Thus, three teachers began full implementation for 7 weeks with the expectation that we would switch the classes at the natural break between the 3rd and 4th quarter. At this point the classrooms would switch teachers but maintain themselves segregated by gender for another 7 weeks until just prior to the end of the academic year. Field notes were taken several days a week and another anonymous survey was conducted just prior to the end of the 3rd quarter. Additionally, representatives from central administration, Associate Superintendent Dr. Morton and Director of Secondary Instruction Stephen Weber, visited one classroom of girls and conducted a roundtable seminar discussion with this class in order to hear from them their thoughts on the model after several weeks of instruction. Finally, Dr. Morton, Mr. Weber along with Mr. Andrew Smithson and Mr. Gary Thornburg, History Department Chair and School Principal respectively met with myself and the 2 other faculty members to begin discussions regarding the formal request to the Orange County School Board to implement the model with the rising 9th grade students for the 2009-10 academic year. Full Support for the model was offered and much of the discussion with the faculty and interested administration centered on the logistics of implementation. The NCLB mandate that single sex instruction must only be offered as a choice was seen as somewhat problematic. The prevailing wisdom was how to adhere to the mandate without providing skeptical students an automatic and easy “out” of the model. It was decided that if we were given permission to proceed that we would have to aggressively and creatively market the concept to skeptical parents and/or rising 9th graders. Persuading the middle school students to approach the model as way to increase achievement and to be part of a unique learning atmosphere would be accomplished with a round table presentation to Stanback Middle students after consulting Stanback principal Dr. Jones. It was decided that 8-10 boys and girls would be chosen after a solicitation for volunteers to present the student side of the model to the middle school students. Dr. Morton and her administrative team would compile supporting statistical information from this study (and others) in a succinct yet comprehensive written communiqué with parents/students affected by the change. The

entire process would be initiated with a formal written proposal to the Board and Superintendent requesting permission to move forward with formal implementation.

The seminar, led by Dr. Morton and Mr. Weber, was revealing and instructive. The discussion took place with 26 girls of mixed academic ability (Honors/Non-Honors). Each girl in the room weighed in with their opinion of the model and generally speaking the overwhelming majority of girls (24/26) were supportive of the model. More than $\frac{1}{2}$ (17/26) were very supportive and expressed a desire to have class this way in another class (science and/or math in particular). All were surprised and delighted to report that despite their overall initial opposition to the model, and initial misgivings, that everyone reported a generally positive experience even if opposed to this method of instruction on ideological grounds. In two focus group interviews and reiterated throughout the seminar it was revealed that several students enjoyed the experience of being a leader in class or in group work activities through the single gender model. The comments seemed to indicate that "leading" was an unintended result of the model. Some students indicated that being a leader through example or by voicing their opinions was something considered risky in a traditional mixed gender setting because of the possible negative social ramifications if their examples or statements were not received well by their mixed peer groups. Thus, taking risks in this way was more likely to happen within unitary gender settings. In other words, and as an example, if a boy were to take a chance to more explicitly state or behave in a way that was not well received by the group it was seen as more of a valuable learning experience rather than a socially embarrassing moment whose lasting implications would prohibit the concrete expression of the aforementioned act or statement in regards to future opportunities. Finally, the seminar concluded with the following group consensus: the instructor was fortunate with this particular make-up of girls who gelled together in a way that was more the result of their individual and collective personalities rather than as a result of the artificially created setting of the gender segregation. Perhaps, but future experiments with this model (if the District permits) should further explore the leadership component as one aspect to be further explored and fostered between and amongst our students. In addition to teaching basic academic skills and content delineated in the course syllabus, all educators hope to illicit and foster other positive and valuable social behaviors such as leadership by the students we are responsible for instructing.

Researcher field notes culled from interviews with the two other instructors and collected over several weeks of end of class impressions indicate several consistent themes. First and foremost the environment of the classrooms changed significantly and in a positive direction. All three instructors stated that classroom management issues dealing with off-task behaviors decreased dramatically. Instructional time spent/wasted getting students to pay attention or to focus on the lesson allowed for more quality teaching opportunities. Secondly, classroom discussions that are valuable and necessary for the comprehension of complex themes inherent in the social sciences were more free flowing and allowed the instructor to bridge the gap between historical occurrences and contemporary problems/issues with events occurring today. For example, an examination of the status of women in South Asia evolved into a discussion of henna tattoos and why all persons indulge in expressing themselves through body art or jewelry as an extension of their personalities and/or belief systems. A

comparison of women in western and eastern societies was further explored which led to further discussion of cultural constructs that led to these seemingly superficial expressions. When this discussion was attempted in a traditional mixed gender setting with another class later on in the year the boys were not seemingly as interested and took little or no part in this roundtable discussion that with a group of young women was seen as a valuable “teachable moment”. A related discussion on the topic of cultural values regarding men and women in the boys only classroom diverged to a frank and honest discussion about domestic violence against women. The consensus from the instructors was that classroom discussions that relate to the content could be explored more openly and honestly in gender segregated settings that seemed to foster more active participation by the students than would otherwise occur in traditional classroom settings. From a research perspective the aforementioned examples may appear anecdotal on the surface but further research would indicate that it’s an avenue worthy of further exploration. Again, bridging the gap to between the historical and the contemporary allows for more independent analysis by students and this is an important occurrence in and of itself.

A final focus group interview of student volunteers and anonymous surveys were completed by all students at the conclusion of the 3rd marking period. Nearly all students, regardless of gender, were surprised that this instructional model was a positive experience. Many students volunteered to participate in a roundtable presentation to 8th graders at our feeder school so as to respond student misgivings. Essentially we are asking our students to be willing to break the paradigm of the traditional public school experience. That is that all classes are meant to be conducted in traditional mixed settings and to do so any differently just isn’t the way things are suppose to be. Persuading anyone to abandon traditional paradigms is difficult enough but especially so for middle adolescents’ whereby fitting in and not doing anything outside what is culturally accepted practice is a tall obstacle to surmount.

The success of our implementation is now leading our school to formally adopt the model with select 9th grade World History classes for 2009-10. Administration will request this permission from the school board shortly. For the 3 instructors, and for me personally, it is our hope that our initial successes evolve to a point where all core classes for 9th graders are offered in a single gender instructional model. From a developmental viewpoint segregating by gender is not unusual and is actually preferred by the students. Opportunities still exist within the traditional school day for boys and girls to mix and interact socially and this too is an important part of overall human development. That said, when so much is riding on academic success and achievement in our modern industrial society it behooves us to implement methodologies and practices that benefit our young people.