

Experience vs. Inexperience: Teacher Perception of Male and Female Students' Behavior

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ABSTRACT

Perceptions of male and female student behaviors in the classrooms were examined in a sample of 32 inexperienced education majors, 36 elementary, and 39 secondary experienced teachers from northeastern Wisconsin schools. Participants read four scenarios depicting two stereotypical male behaviors and two stereotypical female behaviors. Each participant was given a survey with the same gender student in all four scenarios. They rated the students' behaviors on the acceptability, typicality, and disruptiveness to the teacher and other students. Results indicated that the gender of the student did not play a role in the rating of the behaviors. However, the length of teacher experience and the grade level of the teacher did have a significant effect on the ratings. Future implications of the research suggest that the experience level of the teacher is an important variable to investigate.

The differential treatment of males and females in our society leads individuals to develop certain ideas, beliefs, and thoughts about themselves that they carry with them throughout their lives (Ben Tsvi-Mayer, Hertz-Lazarowitz, & Safir, 1989; Lips, 1997; Paludi, 1998; Unger & Crawford, 1996). These beliefs will greatly influence their attitudes towards themselves and others, along with their future goals and aspirations. Many individuals affect children's beliefs about their gender and themselves; namely, peers, family, and teachers. This study focuses on the stereotypical gender views that teachers have toward students' behaviors.

The goal of many teachers is gender equity whereby they would respond to a student based on individual effort and not gender stereotype (Crow, Fok, Hartman & Payne, 1991). Unfortunately, gender equity appears to be rarely accomplished in classrooms despite official policies calling for equity (Olivares & Rosenthal, 1992; Sadker & Sadker, 1994). Based on a thorough review of recent work, Sadker & Sadker (1994) found a consistent pattern of inequity at all grade levels. Teachers interact with males more frequently, they ask them more challenging questions, call on them more often, and give them feedback that is more precise. Kelley (1988) revealed that teachers averaged 44% of their time with girls and 56% of their time with boys. Dweck, Davidson, Nelson, and Enna (1978) found that 90% of positive feedback received by males was addressed specifically to the intellectual quality of their performance. Their research also showed that for males 54.5% of the work-related criticism referred to intellectual inadequacy, whereas for females 88.9% of work-related criticism was addressed to intellectual performance (1978). Dweck et al. (1978) also conducted an experimental study where boys and girls both received the sort of feedback that girls normally experience in the classroom. They found that under these conditions both sexes tended to

loose confidence in their own academic abilities. This uneven distribution of attention, time, and energy eventually takes its toll on girls (Sadker & Sadker, 1994). For instance, Ben Tsvi-Mayer, Hertz-Lazarowitz, & Safir (1989), found that the girls' self-esteem and confidence was affected to the extent that their realization of personal potential was drastically decreased, leading to a decrease in their early participation and leadership qualities. Teachers are important role models for their students. Through teachers' presentation of activities and materials, they provide influential messages pertaining to gender-roles.

Research has identified numerous behaviors that can be classified as stereotypical "male" or "female" (Unger & Crawford, 1996; Woolfolk, 1998). In the classroom, behaviors that are active, aggressive, energetic, physical, and risk-taking (e.g. bullying, rudeness, and attention seeking) have been seen as masculine; whereas, behaviors that are sensitive, whinny, social, and striving to please others have been seen as feminine (Hyun, 1998; Borg & Falzon, 1993). However, the studies that have generated these types of lists were completed by asking teachers to generate stereotypical male and female behavior. The proposed study explores teacher perceptions of behavior without overt references to gender differences.

Other factors have been shown to affect the ratings of student behaviors including grade level, and the extent of teacher experience. Gender related behaviors were rated as more serious by secondary teachers than by elementary teachers suggesting a differential threshold for behaviors based on grade level (Borg & Falzon, 1990). Additionally, the length of teacher experience has received less research attention experience. In studies done by Borg and Falzon (1990) and Hyan (1998) it was found that years of teaching experience moderated of how seriously the teachers rated student behaviors. These results suggest that teachers became progressively more tolerant of undesirable behaviors as their length of teaching experience increases (Borg & Falzon, 1990; Hyan, 1998). Consequently, in this study we will explore the differences between experienced and inexperienced teacher perceptions.

We expected to find that masculine problematic behaviors performed by males would be seen as more acceptable and less severe than problematic female behaviors performed by females. We also expected to find that secondary education teachers (grade levels 7-12) would rate the behaviors as less acceptable and more serious than elementary education teachers (grade levels kindergarten through sixth). Lastly, we expected to find that the experienced teachers with five or more consecutive years of experience in teaching would rate behaviors as more acceptable than would the inexperienced teachers.

METHOD

Participants

A total of 107 respondents participated. The 32 respondents comprising the "inexperienced teachers" category were senior education majors at a mid-sized public comprehensive university in Wisconsin and were enrolled in a clinical class the semester before they begin their student teaching. A clinical is an opportunity for future teachers to observe and interact in the classroom setting. The "experienced teachers" category was comprised of 36 elementary and 39 secondary teachers from northeastern Wisconsin schools were used as the experienced participants. Experienced teachers were defined as having five or more years of consecutive teaching experience due to research suggesting that the attrition rate was approximately 65% after the fifth year of teaching for public school teachers (Konanc, 1996; Macdonald, 1999). Finally, only females were used as participants, due to research suggest-

ing that found that teacher gender is a significant moderator of the attitude toward some classroom behaviors (Borg & Falzon, 1989, 1990). Due to the factorial design of this study, we also utilized women only to reduce the number of participants required.

Materials and Procedures

Four scenarios depicting stereotypical classroom behaviors were developed. The stereotypical behaviors were determined by classroom observation. These behaviors were then piloted by having undergraduates ranked them according to how much they fit gender stereotypical behaviors. The top two stereotypical male behaviors were determined to be shoving and bullying and the top two female behaviors as rumor mongering and whispering.

Each survey contained all four scenarios with the gender of the students involved remaining consistent (either all male protagonists or all female protagonists as indicated by pronoun use). This was done so that each participant was responding to the questions for only one gender. Following each scenario, respondents indicated the acceptability of the behavior, how disruptive it is to the teacher and other students, and how problematic the behavior is. Each item was rated on its own scale, a straight-line continuum, with labeled anchors at each end. Participants were asked to draw a hash line indicating where their response would lie on the spectrum (later measured in millimeters). This method was chosen to maximize the chance of variance in the dependent variable. A cover sheet was also included with directions and a short narrative telling about the research and the researchers. Lastly, a demographics page was attached. The surveys were given to principals of six schools and distributed to the teachers. Once completed, the surveys were given back to the principals and later picked up by the researchers.

RESULTS

The statistical analyses were performed on the data from 107 subjects (32 students, 36 elementary teachers, 39 secondary teachers). Along with males, teachers with less than five consecutive years of teaching experience were excluded from our data analyses.

A 2 x 3 factorial analysis was used to look for main effects and interactions. No main effects were found for the independent variable of gender for any of the scenarios. However, a main effect for teacher level was found in scenarios containing the following three behaviors: whispering, shoving, and rumor mongering (see Table 1). These effects indicated that teacher level had a significant impact on ratings of gender-biased behaviors. A main effect of teacher level was found for the acceptability of shoving [$F(2, 109) = 7.22, p < .001$] meaning that the inexperienced students found this behavior more acceptable than did the experienced teachers. The main effect for the typicality of shoving [$F(2, 102) = 5.06, p < .01$] indicates that the inexperienced teachers found this behavior to be more typical of students than did the experienced teachers. The main effect for the typicality of the behavior of whispering [$F(2, 106) = 5.06, p < .01$] shows that inexperienced teachers found this behavior to be occurring much more frequently than the experienced teachers who are actually experiencing these behaviors. The final main effect found was for the typicality of rumor mongering [$F(2, 109) = 18.24, p < .001$] demonstrating that inexperienced students found this behavior to be much more typical than did experienced teachers.

Table 1. Mean Ratings of Behaviors by Level of Experience

	Students	Elementary	Secondary	
Whispering Typical	-.36 SD= .74	.00 SD=1.00	.34 SD=1.05	$F(2, 106)$ = 5.06, p < .01
Shoving Acceptable .	.46 SD = 1.12	.00 SD = 1.07	-.37 SD = .58	$F(2, 109)$ = 7.22, p < .001
Shoving Typical	-.43 SD = .93	.00 SD = 1.06	.26 SD = .86	$F(2, 102)$ = 5.06, p < .01
Rumor Mongering Typical	-.75 SD = .58	.49 SD = .95	.14 SD = .94	$F(2, 102)$ = 18.24 p < .001

Note: Respondents ratings were standardized. Negative scores indicate high typicality and high acceptability.

DISCUSSION

The first hypothesis that scenarios containing problematic “masculine” behaviors by male students would be rated as less severe and more acceptable than those containing problematic “feminine” behaviors by female students was not supported. No significant gender difference was detected contradicting previous research findings that suggest that gender equity is rarely accomplished in the classroom and that males and females are treated differently (e.g., Olivares & Rosenthal, 1992; Sadker & Sadker, 1994). Our findings could suggest, that for these respondents, gender did not effect how teachers rated the student behaviors. Teachers may be treating children more equally now than they did when the previous research was completed. Or, these teachers could be atypical. These gender-neutral findings may be the result of the implementation of many of the policies calling for gender equity.

The design of our experiment may have also played a role in our findings. Participating teachers received only one gender of student in their four scenarios; therefore, eliminating the chance for comparison between the genders that happens in the classroom. It may be that the gender of the student was too subtle to be noticed. The teachers may have been simply responding to the behavior of the student with little to no consideration of the gender of the student committing the behavior. However, many of the gender findings were in the expected direction so significant differences may have been found with a larger sample and/or more explicit gender differentiation.

The second hypothesis stating that elementary education teachers would rate the scenarios as less acceptable and more serious than secondary education teachers was supported. This supports previous findings that as students age certain behaviors become more acceptable and less problematic. What is acceptable of a tenth grade student is not always acceptable of a second grade student. It also seems that as children age they become better at knowing what behaviors are unacceptable and being able to hide these behaviors from adults. It is also pos-

sible that adults work harder at trying to teach younger children acceptable and appropriate behavior because younger children are believed to be more impressionable. It is also true, that as adults age, their impressions change. This could help explain why experienced teachers rated the behaviors differently. Since they are more experienced and more likely to have experienced a broader range of behaviors, their views of what is typical and acceptable are likely to be different than that of an inexperienced teacher.

The third hypothesis that experienced teachers with five or more consecutive years of experience in teaching will rate behavior as more acceptable than inexperienced teachers was supported. Inexperienced teachers found the behavior of shoving to be much less acceptable than did either the elementary or secondary teachers. Here again, experienced teachers may be more realistic given their wider range of experience. However, inexperienced teachers also found the behaviors of rumor mongering, whispering, and shoving to be more typical than did the experienced teachers. In this case, when compared to experienced teachers, the inexperienced teachers "overestimated" the occurrence (or typicality) of problematic behaviors. While this may be due to lack of experience, it also suggests a larger negativity than we may want to see in our student teachers.

Our findings have implications for the further education of college students studying to be teachers. While they are aware that problematic behaviors exist in the classroom; they also seem to be under the impression that these behaviors are happening very frequently. Perhaps inexperienced teachers might have a pessimistic view about the behavior of students, in part, due to the heavy media coverage of violence in the schools. However, information from the experienced teachers suggests that these behaviors are not occurring at the high rate expected. Perhaps, teacher education needs to help student teachers have a more accurate and positive view of classroom interactions. However, it may also be true that experienced teachers are accustomed to seeing these behaviors and, therefore, downplay their occurrence.

Overall, this research suggests that our education system might be moving in the right direction. Gender differences that previously existed may be diminishing. This research also suggests that further empirical study of gender differences is needed. More importantly, it lays the groundwork for additional empirical research on the effects of experience on teachers' perceptions of students' behavior that may have important implications for teacher training.

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