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**Experiences and Perceptions of Latina Students Attending Single-Gender and
Coeducational Classrooms**

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Abstract

This qualitative research was designed to explore the 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 Latina special education 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. In comparison to Latina students attending a coed special education classroom, students in the single-gender special education classroom reported increased school attendance, greater comfort levels in class, less distractions, and improved attitudes toward school.

Experiences and Perceptions of Latina Students Attending Single-Gender and Coeducational Classrooms

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 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1999). The teen pregnancy and birth rates of Latinas have not followed the decline of African-American and White rates (American Association of University Women, 1998; Ginorio & Huston, 2001; Portner, 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. Single-sex education has been proposed as a means of addressing the needs of at-risk students (Datnow, Hubbard, & Conchas, 2001; Datnow & Hubbard, 2000; Streitmatter, 1997; 1999). The issue of single-gender education, however, has not been examined in special education. Research in special education rarely focuses on gender issues. Through qualitative research methodology, the present study sought to give voice to Latina students in single-gender and coeducational special education placements.

Method

Sample

The participants for this study were nine Latina special education students who attended single-gender and mixed-gender special education classrooms; all participants were in their first, second, or third year of the program, (freshman to junior year of high school). Ages 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. 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 mixed-gender special education program were interviewed as informants to verify and triangulate data collected from student participants. 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.

Procedure

A qualitative research approach was used to investigate the impact of single-gender special day classrooms on Latina high school students identified as learning disabled in one urban school district in northern California. The study used classroom observations, focus-group interviews, and individual interviews to gather information on the impact of the single-gender and mixed-gender programs. Open-ended and semi-structured questionnaires developed by single-gender program researchers at Johns Hopkins University were used for the interview protocols (Datnow, Hubbard & Conchas, 2001). Transcription allowed content analysis of the interviews to be used for developing generalized themes that 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).

Data Analysis

The transcribed interviews, field notes, and documents were organized according to dates, place setting, and individual and focus group interviews. The researcher reviewed the data to get a sense of the overall picture emerging from the various information sources. The transcribed data from the individual and focus group interviews were coded according to the emergent themes that arose from the focus groups and individual interviews. The notes and data collected from the classroom observations were transcribed to provide information related to the classroom behaviors and school attitudes of the students, and were also coded thematically. Detailed descriptions and in-depth quotations were included to provide understanding and insights into the themes that arose throughout the data analysis process. The researcher looked for quotations and observations that fit together to highlight a particular theme, issue, or idea. The data were labeled and indexed to organize the material into meaningful and manageable categories. Questions that developed from the transcribed reports were presented to students in an interview format to verify data previously collected.

Results

The interview data were organized into three categories related to students' attitudes toward school (See Figure 1). School attitudes were measured by general affective statements indicating positive or negative feelings toward school reported in focus group and individual interviews. School attitudes included relationships among students, teachers, and peers, student attitudes about academics, and student perceptions of the school environment. Attitudes of students in the single-gender and coed classes were compared according to specific categories

and themes. Figure 1 provides an overview of the separate categories and themes that were content analyzed.

Figure 1: School Attitudes by Category and Theme: Single Gender/Coed Classroom

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

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. As one student explained, “You can talk about more personal stuff, and you don’t have to worry about guys teasing you and you are more free. I used to be scared to read in front of guys, now I am not afraid.”

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. Latina students reported feeling at ease in the single-gender class. As one Latina student in the single-gender class stated:

They'll (boys) talk about us, pass notes, sometimes make you feel uncomfortable, say little stupid slurs, like sexual, or something negative, or put you down saying you're dumb or something like that. . . in a special ed class with both genders, I never felt comfortable with it. I felt I should keep quiet, just so nobody would pass judgment on me. But in here we're all the same sex, we all understand what we're going through. I can express my feelings, nobody's shy, everybody is friends, so I like it, it's better.

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.

Category II: Academics

Attendance and Grades

Students in the single-gender special day classroom reported improved attendance compared to previous years in coed classes. One Latina student in the single-gender classroom described her attendance patterns, "I used to be absent because I didn't like going to my classes. I mean, I didn't see the point if I'm going to be failing. Now I come more."

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 rate of attendance 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

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. This perception is reflected in the comment of one Latina student, "It's comfortable to be in here. You get a lot of help in here; you just feel good being here."

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. In the words of one Latina student, "They (the boys) just act dumb, like they always talk about girls. They ask you stupid questions like, 'Oh have you got your period' or 'Damn she's big.'"

The coed teacher viewed the girls as tough and able to stand up to the boys. He explained, "If a girl can come into my class, she can hold her own. She can probably beat up half the boys." This viewpoint, however, contradicts the perceptions of the girls. As one Latina student reported, "They (the boys) feel overpowering. They feel that they have power over us because they are boys and there are more of them." Another Latina student expressed frustration at not being heard or respected for her opinions. "A lot of time I want to tell them something, but if I do, they don't listen to me. It's just, "Damn, why don't you just shut up. They want to hear their own voices instead of other people"

Distractions

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.

The girls in the coed class had a similar experience as reflected in one Latina student's comments, "They (the boys) are always talking across (the room). They just talk because they have a mouth, but when you tell them be quiet, they won't. They'll just get louder and louder."

Effects of Single-Gender Education

Single-gender special education was viewed overall as an affirming and positive experience for Latina students in a safe and comfortable environment. In comparison to Latina students attending a coed special education classroom, 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.

Latina students attending the single-gender special education classroom appeared to be advantaged in single-sex environments compared to their counterparts in the coed classroom. Latina single-gender classroom 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.

Implications for Special Education: Research and Practice

The small sample size and different genders and classroom teaching styles of the teachers in this study are clear limitations that require replication. A closer look at the complexities of gender and background experiences of educators is suggested by this study. Datnow, Hubbard, and Conchas (2001) point 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, Hubbard, & Conchas, 2001; Streitmatter, 1999). 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.

Conclusion

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. The issue of gender in special education has been long neglected in the special education literature. It is timely to continue scholarly efforts in this understudied area.

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