

A QUALITATIVE STUDY ABOUT TEACHING IN A CANADIAN INDEPENDENT SCHOOL FOR BOYS: FEMALE TEACHER PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACT

This six-question Qualitative questionnaire assessed theoretical, grade level challenges, teaching strategies, and discipline control in the classroom. It was administered to young (≤ 30 years) and experienced (≥ 5 years) Senior School level (Grades 7-11) female teachers teaching in all-boys CAIS (Canadian Association of Independent Schools) in the province of Quebec. The study produced results that a female teacher must have: solid discipline methods, maintain professional distance, and an interest in the boys so that male students see her as a caring and concerned leader for them. The results benefit teacher education through the participant's responses based on their experiences.

Keywords: Independent School, teacher education, classroom experience, single-gender, identity.

History of the CAIS

The CAIS (Canadian Association of Independent Schools) (2006) describes itself as: The Canadian Association of Independent Schools (CAIS) is an association of schools with founding dates ranging from 1788 through to 1995. Member schools vary in size from under 100 to over 1,100 students; some are residential while others are day schools; some are for boys or girls only; others are coeducational.

Out of the 93 accredited CAIS schools in 2012, less than 10% of them are single-gendered schools, yet the irony is that “51 of the 58 member schools of the Canadian Association of Independent Schools were founded as single-sex schools” (M.P. Maxwell & J.D. Maxwell, 1995, p. 333). This demonstrates that single-gendered CAIS schools are modifying their schools to accommodate both genders.

In the province of Quebec, and in the city of Montreal, there are more only-girls CAIS schools than only-boys CAIS schools, and day CAIS schools are the most common type. Many CAIS schools have changed their school dynamics by becoming coeducational to accommodate areas of concern. J.D. Maxwell & M.P. Maxwell (1995) state, “Between 1962 and 1993, 23 single-sex CAIS schools became coeducational and of these, 14 were boys’ schools that added girls” (p. 318). An example of an all-boys CAIS schools in the province of Quebec that has become co-educational is Lower Canada College (est. in 1861), located in Montreal, which became co-educational in two phases including accepting grade 12 girls in 1992 and girls into other grades in 1995. Bowen (1995) demonstrated that sex-role attitudes changed in an elite private boy’s school that admitted female students.

Students in CAIS Schools have a very high percentage of their students that go onto undergraduate university studies, parents of these students pay high tuition (usually more than double for boarding students), and Independent School enrollment has increased from 5.3% to 8% between 1999-2008 in Canada so that many of these schools can be more selective in the acceptance process (Aurini, 2008).

The CAIS merged with SEAL (Standards in Excellence And Learning) Canada, which is an internationally recognized association of private schools in 2010. A CAIS Independent School is a private school, but the difference is in the legal structure in that an Independent School has an independent board of governors or trustees, whereas a private school does not require this type of structure (CAIS, 2006). Government funding is limited in CAIS schools due to their private structure.

Rationale for the Study

There should be more research conducted in CAIS single-gendered schools. The purpose of this study is to assess opposite gendered teachers perspectives in an all-boys CAIS member school to learn more about the teacher experience through the following six topics: the perceived benefits of working with students of the opposite gender; the drawbacks of working with students of the opposite gender; challenges for a teacher in this dynamic; whether certain grade and age levels are more challenging than others; analysis of teaching strategies which are effective; and classroom behaviour strategies or discipline techniques that are useful. Previous research regarding significant developments with female leadership in all areas of education such as Normore & Jean-Marie (2008) has demonstrated that female teachers and Administrators play a very important role in boy’s education.

The analysis of topics assists the Administrators of single-gendered CAIS Schools through the hiring and advising of potential opposite gendered teachers of their students, teachers that are considering working in an opposite gendered Independent School, female teachers that work in all-boys Independent Schools, parents of students who attend all-boy schools, and the male students who attend all-boys CAIS member schools. This study can assist all-boys CAIS schools to seek better standards in academics, and in that process create more appealing schools to their constituents in their communities upon learning from the experiences of the female teacher perspectives.

As many researchers can attest it is not easy to gain access to CAIS environments. Heads of CAIS accredited Independent Schools and the school affiliated Board of Directors can be selective regarding research, and this frequently prevents educational researchers from wanting to further explore research topics. The boarding dynamic in CAIS schools often makes it more risqué as well so that extreme caution is exercised by boarding schools in order to reduce the chance of potential harm or safety to their students because of the trust that parents place in the schools to protect their children. However, it is logical that CAIS schools can benefit from research leading to better policy and practice associated with teacher education.

Impact on Teacher Education

Teachers in Canadian University Education programs have important decisions to make regarding where they wish to work upon completion of their program, and also what school dynamic they will work best in for success. There are many female teachers who discover through their experiences that teaching in an all-boy's CAIS atmosphere is the best for them. It is important for teachers to discuss their experiences through research. Edwards-Groves & Sturt (2013) found that teachers are frequently constrained by "time demands, workplace structures and accountabilities," (p. 17) and this hinders important professional learning because educators can learn from their experiences. In other words, teacher's dialogues about their experiences should be encouraged more often.

A modern trend in education is noticeable through the use of microblogging including Twitter as an effective medium for professional learning and it is beneficial to teacher practice. The encouragement of individual participants, such as evidenced through teacher education, promotes ownership of teacher learning (Holmes et al., 2013).

There is a shortage of teaching posts, and questions about the quality of teaching in Canada due to reduced budgets (Staklis & Henke, 2013). This makes teacher education more important as each job has greater significance. It was reported that provinces such as Ontario, British Columbia, and Nova Scotia experienced a teaching shortage in the early 2000's (Gervais & Thony, 2001), but now there is a surplus of teachers (Macdonald, 2011). In Quebec, a teaching surplus is not the same concern suggesting that young teacher's, or out-of-province Education students may wish to remain in Quebec upon the completion of their training.

Literature Review Associated with the Qualitative Questionnaire

It is important to study boys-only Canadian Independent Schools to learn more about teaching strategies, and discipline methods that benefit these types of schools. The first two questions of the Questionnaire deal with the benefits and drawbacks of working with opposite gendered students are theoretical in nature. The study of gender has espoused that teacher absence has a profound negative impact on achievement that is associated with female teachers who work at an all-girls school, and with male teachers who work at a boys-only private school (Ghuman & Lloyd, 2010). Fallon (1995) suggest that more teacher contact with boys at an all-boys private school is beneficial through daily exposure or through intensive education.

It has been suggested by Legewie & Diprete (2012) that school environment concepts of masculinity in peer culture foster or inhibit boy's development of anti-school attitudes and environments much differently from the girls. The first two questions of the Questionnaire are linked to the idea that a boys-only school may be the best environment to excel because it eliminates the female competitive element, and boys will achieve better results because it is easier to fit in. Gender identity challenges for males through studies (e.g., Walker, 2001; Anderson & Accomando, 2002; Gottschall et al., 2010) demonstrate that it is important

for us to further research the impact that female teachers have on their male students who work in all-boys schools.

Question number three, or the final theoretical question in the Questionnaire, asks the participants to assess whether they think it is more challenging to teach in an opposite gendered school. Fry (2009) suggests that single-gendered private and public schools achieve better academic results for their students than the co-educational dynamic. Mills & Keddie (2007) assert that boys can be problematic to girls and teachers if they do not see gender justice.

Archambault et al. (2009) suggest that school supported interventions create positive-social atmospheres at the high school level in Quebec which encourage senior level students to perform better in all areas including academic and social dynamics, while reducing drop-out rates. More research into specific subject areas with female teachers in CAIS all-boys schools is necessary.

Question number 4 of the Questionnaire asks participants to identify which grade level in the Senior School is the most challenging. Previous research such as Bandura (1986) theorized the importance of social development playing a huge role with students in terms of motivation, and self-evaluation for assessing which ages are more important for social and intellectual development. Fall & Roberts (2011) suggest that students who perform well academically and socially in grade ten have less chance of dropping out in grade twelve, and healthy social contexts promote better academic achievement with both genders. Question number 4 of the Questionnaire connects to issues with boy's maturity and leadership such as with Fish (2011).

The topic of teaching strategy through experience is connected to question 5 of the Questionnaire dealing with teaching strategies. Teacher creativity demonstrates beneficial ways teachers can modify lessons so that student's needs and interests are better met (Brooks & Brooks, 1999). The academic environment is enhanced the most when teachers act as facilitators by allowing the resources to be present so that students can learn through active participation and an interest in the subject matter (Rogers & Frieberg, 1994).

The sixth question of the Questionnaire asks the female teacher participants to assess their classroom strategies in association with discipline techniques when working with their male students. This question was impacted by Willms & Ma (2004) assertion that student's greatest concern is school discipline, relationship with teachers, and concerns about classroom disruption in that order. Lippe (2010) asserts that good classroom control contributes to better teacher communication with boys more so than with girls. The six questions promote teacher education through learning from the female teachers experiences.

Methods

Participants in this study were asked to complete a six-question Questionnaire after completing their *Personal Information Page*. This *Personal Information Page* requested the participants to fill-in information about them including *Name; Birthdate; Place of Birth; Date of Completing the Questionnaire; Are you Bilingual (Be specific in what languages and detail written and/or spoken); Academic Background (High School onwards, Location, Years Inclusive, Degree, and Major); Number of Years as a Teacher (Excluding Student Teaching); Teaching Background (excluding student teaching), Location, and Years; Did you ever attend a single-gendered school? Yes or No (if you circled Yes, provide specific details in lines below indicating Years, Grade(s), and Location); Courses Currently Teaching and Grade Level; and Other Courses and Grade Level Taught in the Past*. This *Personal Information Page* is important for assessing possible connections between the participants' backgrounds with their responses for the Questionnaire. The female participants in this study did not ever attend a single-gendered school.

According to Creswell (2008), a Questionnaire is a “form used in a survey design that participants in a study complete and return to the researcher” (p. 394). The Questionnaire was attached by the researcher of this study through separate e-mail to each participant on June 20th, 2013. The participants were informed in the e-mail text that they were not to speak to each other, and not to anyone else when completing their Questionnaire. One participant, who I will call “Teacher 2” in all future points of reference, completed and returned her Questionnaire to me by e-mail later on the same day, and the other participant, who I will call “Teacher 1” in all future points of reference, completed and returned her Questionnaire to me by e-mail eight days later on June 28th, 2013. Both participants wrote their responses in English, and they completed their Questionnaires at the end of the 2012-13 school year in late June of 2013.

Participants

Two Senior School level (Gr. 9-11) female teachers who work out of the same Senior School (Grade 7-11) Social Studies department at a CAIS day all-boys school (Maternelle to grade 11) located in the province of Quebec. Teacher 1 is a twenty-eight year old teacher with five years of experience exclusively at the all-boys Independent School, and Teacher 2 is a thirty year old teacher with six of the past seven years of experience working at the all-boys Independent School. Teacher 2 began her career working one year at an all-girls school that is located geographically close to the all-boys school. Both participants are bilingual in French and English spoken and written abilities, and both are born and raised in the province of Quebec. Teacher 2 currently teaches Grade 9 History & Citizenship Education, Grade 9 French, and a Grade 10-11 Quebec culture option. Teacher 1 primarily teaches Grade 10 History & Citizenship Education, and a regular Grade 10 French class. The Grade 9 and 10 History & Citizenship Education classes are Quebec Ministry of Education mandated Quebec history courses that all students in Quebec must take in order to graduate high school.

The focus of this study is with Female teachers, with less than 10 years of teaching experience, who work as teachers of an accredited CAIS all-boys school. A benefit with utilizing younger teacher participants in this qualitative study is that they can provide fresh perspectives based on their teaching experience regarding research topics as they have primarily taught or worked exclusively in a CAIS all-boys school.

Procedure

Teacher 1 and Teacher 2 were asked to complete six questions as part of the Questionnaire, and 15 single-spaced lines were provided for each response. The structure of the Questionnaire included three questions on one page and the other three questions on the second page. Questions #1-3 were theoretical in nature as they request that teacher participants reflect about the dynamic of teaching male students at a CAIS school. The three questions were as follows: 1. *What do you see as the benefits of working with students who are of the opposite gender to you?;* 2. *What are the drawbacks of working with students who are of the opposite gender to you?;* and 3. *Do you think that it is more challenging for a teacher to teach in an opposite gendered school than it is for a teacher to teach either mixed gender, or the same gender?*

Questions #4-6 were different from the previous three in scope. This intended diversity and focus with these three questions explained important information about specific aspects such as grade level challenges, teaching strategies, and discipline associated with behaviour. The final three questions were as follows: 4. *Do you think that certain grade levels are more challenging for a female teacher who works in an all-boys CAIS Independent School?;* 5. *What teaching strategies do you find the most effective for reaching Independent School students of the opposite gender to yourself?;* and 6. *What classroom behaviour strategies or modified discipline techniques do you find the most useful with working with Independent School Students of the opposite gender to you?*

The data was open coded and analyzed to reflect participants' interests and concerns arising from emic perspectives for each of the six questions. All areas of the Checklist for Evaluating the Process of a Qualitative Study were met (Creswell, 2001, p. 308; Leedy & Ormrod, 2000, p. 288). I used a hand analysis of the qualitative data meaning, "read the data, mark it by hand, and divide it into parts" according to text segment codes (Creswell, 2008, p. 246). It is necessary for me to incorporate personal reflections and interpretations of the information through the use of etic terms based on items such as behaviour, teacher concern, or discomfort for teacher. It is important to layer the analysis and interconnect themes to see if there are multiple perspectives, contrary evidence and saturation through the analysis of the data (Creswell, 2008, p. 259). It is necessary to explore themes from the data in order to describe the significance associated with the findings.

Results

1. What do you see as the benefits of working with students who are of the opposite gender to you?

Both participants have responded positively, yet in different ways. Teacher 1 focused on the importance of being a role-model to the boys so that she can improve their social skills and manners which will assist them with interacting with the opposite gender. She feels it is important for the boys to understand issues and behaviour from the perspective of someone of the opposite gender. Teacher 2's response was about how it modified her paradigm working in all-male environment. She recognized that she appreciates different perspectives more now. As teacher 2 wrote, "It gives me different ways of viewing things, different perspectives that I wouldn't have thought otherwise." This assists her with understanding the opposite gender in a better way. The analysis represents different approaches in terms of how the participants interpret the benefits of working with opposite gendered students, but there exists a similarity through how the working relationship can be enhanced through the social interaction.

2. What are the drawbacks of working with students who are of the opposite gender to you?

Both teacher participant responses focused on frustrations with behaviour and a lack of focus with the boys. Teacher 2 said the following, "I don't always understand their (male) way of thinking and it gets frustrating sometimes. Work ethic is different. Stupidity is frustrating also (farting, burping...). You don't see that when the girls are there." Teacher 1 provided her longest response for this question. Teacher 1 focused on challenges with behaviour as she stated, "It is sometimes more difficult to understand or accept their behaviour when it doesn't concord with the behaviour typically associated with your own gender (or behaviour that you are use to)." Both female teacher participants demonstrated frustration with the boy's behaviour in this working dynamic.

Teacher 1 suggested the need for a female teacher to be careful with her conduct for fear of accusations of a sexual nature by a male student. She states, "There exists a common fear of possible accusations of inappropriate, sexually-intended behaviour toward a student of the opposite gender. Teachers must be even more careful about the way they touch or approach students of the opposite gender." The advice provided here is that a female teacher will have to maintain their professional distance from male students at all times. Boys making sexual innuendos, and violating female teacher personal space can be inferred as a possible problem.

Teacher 1 elaborated on challenges that are associated with female authority in terms of the classroom dynamic. Teacher 1 states, "With boys specifically, it is sometimes difficult for them to accept the authority of a female teacher, especially when they have not been exposed to authoritative women in their lives." A female teacher in an all-boys environment is conscious of the fact that gender does play a part in their working relationship with boys. Teacher 1 suggests that the boys will view an authoritarian female teacher differently than their male teacher counterpart when she states:

“Female teachers who yell or try to be more authoritative are often not received the same way as male teachers who do so. A female teacher who gets angry might be ‘PMSing’ or acting like a ‘bitch,’ whereas a male teacher who does so is just being authoritative.”

Female teachers in all-boys Independent School perceive their job in the sense of discipline as more difficult due to boy’s perceptions associated with gender stereotypes in order to validate the teacher’s classroom management. Out of the 2013 graduating class, there were 25% of the boys, called “lifers,” that attended since Maternelle.

3. Do you think that it is more challenging for a teacher to teach in an opposite gendered school than for a teacher to teach either mixed gender, or the same gender?

Teacher 2 asserted “Yes,” while Teacher 1 stated, “I’m not sure. I think there are challenges in all situations.” For Teacher 2 who emphatically stated “Yes;” she continued to write that “the students will challenge you more at first as a female teacher and also in my case as a French teacher because it’s their second language.” This response suggests challenges associated with teaching the specific subject of French, and the difficulty for boys, whose first language predominantly is English, with learning French as their second language. Teacher 2 also states, “It’s important to put the professional barrier [up] right away because some boys sometimes try to flirt which is really uncomfortable and mostly inappropriate, so it can be awkward.” Teacher 2 provided her longest response for this question indicating her concern for boys not clearly understanding boundaries associated with personal space and communication. Female teachers must maintain their professional distance from their male students and this same sentiment was mentioned by Teacher 1 in the previous question.

Teacher 1 suggested that she was not sure if it is harder for a female teacher than a male one, “Every gender comes with its difficulties, so perhaps gaining more experience with one gender (in a same-gender school) can give you an advantage over having to constantly work with and manage relationships between students of both genders.” Teacher 1’s perspective continues when she suggests, “On the other hand, teaching both genders at the same time might alleviate some of the difficulties because the students moderate each other in certain ways.” It might be interpreted that at an all-boys school, the boys do not moderate poor behaviour amongst themselves as much as in co-education environments.

Teacher 2 felt that it was more difficult for a female teacher working with Senior School level boys in a single-gendered Independent School, while Teacher 1 was not certain that it was more difficult for a female teacher working in the same all-boys school environment.

4. Do you think certain grade levels are more challenging for an opposite gendered teacher from their students in an Independent School single gendered school?

Teacher 2 felt that grade nine is the worst level, and it is imperative that a female teacher in all-boys Independent Schools will have to establish herself very quickly as an authoritarian figure. Teacher 1 suggested that the grade range of 8-10 were the most difficult because she states, “I think that these years in which [male] students are changing the most and searching for their place and identity amongst their peers.” Teacher 1 explains her rationale in “that is when [male] students are most likely to act out. By grade 11 [the province of Quebec high school graduating year], most [male] students have matured, and any difficulties associated with teaching opposite-gender students would likely have subdued.”

These two responses indicate that the years prior to their graduating year are the most challenging years for a high school level teacher in this all-boys teaching dynamic. There is an acceptance and indirect insinuation by Teacher 1 that a female teacher needs to be a good disciplinarian with a strong presence in order to enjoy the teaching dynamic of working at the Senior School level of all-boys Independent School.

5. What teaching strategies do you find the most effective for reaching Independent School students of the opposite gender to yourself?

Teacher 2 responded that she tries to use methods that interest her male students. The use of “competitions, games, movements,” while also selecting texts that are more oriented towards boys. Teacher 1 response was based on her working relationships with male students. As Teacher 1 states, “To try to build strong relationships with the students- become interested in their lives and share things from your life as well. Make them [male students] see you more like a human being, and not necessarily just an adult of another gender.”

These two different responses demonstrate a teaching strategy that has the boys in mind. Their considerate approach appears beneficial for establishing better working relationships with the students of an opposite gender. The responses are similar through the human element of concern for the male students in this case. Teacher 1 and Teacher 2 suggest success can be attained through the class dynamic by using the following strategies: selecting texts or work that will interest a male audience; utilizing competitive teaching strategies to entice the boys to be engaged; ensuring that the boys see that you care about them; and assisting them with seeing that you want them to do well.

6. What classroom behaviour strategies or modified discipline techniques do you find the most useful with working with Independent School students of the opposite gender to you?

Teacher 2 succinctly answered, “You can be a lot harder with boys than girls, so I really like that part.” Teacher 2 can compare her previous experience of working for a year in a girls-only CAIS school with the boys-only school that she now works at. Teacher 1 responded with “same as above” indicating that she felt that her answer for the previous question 5 can be applied for this question as well. This can be summarized as interpreting that Teacher 1 feels establishing strong relationships with the boys is most important so that they see you as a human being, and that you care for them. This will assist with how one might utilize certain behaviour strategies and discipline techniques.

Teacher 1 and Teacher 2 did not mention specific strategies for discipline. Perhaps this suggests that it depends on the situation as it may arise in the classroom, or the personality associated with the student. Teacher 2 suggested that boys can handle stricter discipline better than girls. Teacher 2 seems to enjoy the control that she is able to have over her male students.

Teacher 1 did not specifically answer the question through her focus on relationship building associated through discipline. This might suggest that she is flexible or modifies her in-class discipline based on the situation. There is a strong sense of control that is shared through both Teacher 1 and Teacher 2 responses which suggests how important this must be for a female teacher in the all-boys classroom.

Discussion

Helpful information can be attained through the female teacher perspectives for assisting us with understanding female teacher’s experiences or working in a CAIS all-boys school. However, there were areas which the participants did not mention or cover with their responses.

The all-boys CAIS school in which the two participants work is a Lap-top inclusive school meaning that all students and teachers are provided with laptops that they are expected to bring and utilize for their classes. Moos & Alzevedo (2009) stated that student’s computer self-efficacy will relate well to their success in computer-based learning environments. Both teacher participants did not mention Information Technology in their responses. This was surprising upon further analysis as the last three questions of the Questionnaire involve classroom experiences affiliated with items such as grade level challenges, teaching strategies, and discipline associated with behaviour.

Teacher participants did not mention that they wanted their students to learn through active participation or to develop a further interest in the subject matter. There was no mention of experiential learning. The primary focus with their responses were associated with in-class behaviour and discipline issues even for questions that dealt with teaching strategies or theoretical benefits and drawbacks in their teaching dynamic. The importance of teacher support of their male students contributing to greater student satisfaction and achievement was definitely conveyed by the female teacher participants in this study as supported in previous research (Smith, 2013; Porter, 2010; Silns & Murray- Harvey, 1999).

Many challenges exist for young female teachers such as Teacher 1 and Teacher 2 in all-boys CAIS schools. The analysis in this study suggests that it is a very different experience for them instead of their male counterparts, and that it can be more difficult for a female teacher in this type of all-boys domain due to behaviour concerns. In terms of teacher education; young female teachers in training should consider the emerging learned experiences of female teachers who work in all-boys CAIS schools. A female teacher may recognize the need to evolve or adapt their own teaching strategies and styles if they are hired to work at an all-boys CAIS school.

Implications for Future Research in Education

We need to conduct more research about class dynamics associated with specific subject areas such as History & Citizenship classes with Francophone female teachers' who work in all-boys Independent Schools in order to enhance the educational environment. This is more necessary in Independent Schools which are located in predominantly Anglophone regions of Quebec.

Additional research associated with female teachers who work with opposite-gendered students with classroom dynamics, and their lives in an all-boys CAIS school are necessary. We need to further explore the benefits and drawbacks that are associated with this type of teaching occupation.

There is a need to learn more about working with specific grade levels, Information Technology issues, teaching strategies, and discipline techniques at CAIS all-boys schools. These include class, ethnicity, socio-economic aspects, sexual orientation, academic areas, classroom management, leadership, Administration, provincial and regional studies as there are enormous gaps with all-boys CAIS schools. Future research, building upon female teachers experiences in all-Boys CAIS schools, is just the start.

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