

Teachers respond differently to pre-kindergarten boys and girls

Results emerge from study of sources of student-teacher conflict and closeness

June 3, 2013, Victoria – A study of four-year-olds found teachers' reactions to them was sometimes different according to the child's gender.

That, says University of Victoria researcher Kevin Runions, suggests that teachers – like most of the rest of us – show gender bias when dealing with children.

Runions, an assistant professor who first trained as a teacher for children just starting out in school, spent several years living in Perth, Australia, and collected his data there. It came from children in 33 classrooms in 12 different schools. He is presenting the results of his study at the 2013 Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences.

Runions was interested in examining different factors that contribute to both closeness and conflict between teachers and their young charges, and surveyed teachers to ask them to rate conflict and closeness for the children in their classes. (All of the teachers surveyed were female.)

Runions said that in many areas, the teachers rated boys and girls the same.

For example, he said that regardless of gender, teachers associated disruptive behaviour with conflict.

And for boys and girls alike, teachers said they were closer to children who did not show signs of emotional problems through such things as crying or distress.

But he said some survey results were gender-specific.

If pre-kindergarten girls are being disruptive, said Runions, this seems to keep them from having a close relationship with the teacher. But that's not the case for boys: The teachers reported that a boy's being disruptive did not affect whether or not a teacher felt close to him.

The teachers said low social skills predicted conflict with girls – but not with boys.

They also said that emotional issues such as crying predicted conflict with boys, but not with girls.

“The interesting thing is that these differences fall along our gender stereotypes,” says Runions. “The data paint a picture that the gender stereotyping we bring as teachers could be problematic.”

It's important not to blame teachers for their reactions. Teachers are human, and we are all drawn more to some people than to others.

But he said that it's important to understand the sources of closeness and conflict between teachers and their students, because high-conflict relationships are bad for the social development of a child.

For example, he says some of his other research suggests that children who are in conflict with a teacher – especially children who are socially withdrawn – are at higher risk of being victimized by their peers, whereas closeness with a teacher can be a protective factor.

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