Gendered Motivation Amongst High School Students

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Abstract

A series of qualitative focus groups were conducted amongst high school students. The groups were conducted as single sex groups of friends to discuss what motivates students in their school work. Students were selected from co-educational as well as single sex schools.

Girls and boys have different understandings of the worth of schooling. The different genders also are motivated by different aspects of school education and, in essence, are motivated differently in terms of school learning. This paper will explore dimensions of the differences in motivation with respect to gender and discuss some potential further quantitative and qualitative measures to better understand adolescent academic motivation.

This paper is based upon the discussion between students as they explore what motivates them in school and what it is about particular subjects that allow them to better engage with the learning tasks they confront.

Introduction

This paper reports the findings of a qualitative research project which used focus groups to create data about adolescents' understanding of their motivation in school. The project is part of a work-in-progress to better describe academic motivation. It is the growing conviction, based on this data as well as previous work (Mansfield & Vallance 2003; Vallance 2003; Vallance 2004; Vallance & Mansfield 2004), that males and females are motivated differently in the secondary classroom and they describe motivated states in different ways. It was Gilligan (1982) who reminded researchers that the gender composition of one’s sample influences the outcomes of the research and that gendered samples need not always represent the best construction for each gender.

The research reported here is part of an attempt to listen to what students themselves say about their motivation in school subjects and what interests them in the school work they do. The focus group method was chosen to maximise the scope of the project without becoming a vast exercise in time management. The focus group approach also offers a clear sense of ‘grounded reality’ as participants being well known to each other are less likely to speak in ways that are contrary to their behaviour and general conduct amongst their friends. Thus it was hoped that this project might access a student-friendly understanding of academic motivation in their words and expressions relating to their everyday experiences in their classrooms.

Theoretical Context

Much has been written about academic adolescent motivation. The theoretical context of this project is grounded in the achievement goal theory of motivation. Achievement goal theory describes student achievement as directed towards the academic goals of task mastery or performance (Meece 1991; Meece, Blumenfeld & Hoyle 1988). Task mastery has been associated with intrinsic motivation and high levels of cognitive engagement (Meece et al. 1988) as well as sustained effort and deep processing (Elliot, McGregor & Gable 1999). Performance goals have been associated with students’ efforts to perform relative to their peers (Meece 1991) and their reliance on external motivating stimuli (Meece et al. 1988). Performance goal orientation can be further resolved into approach and avoidance (Elliot 1999; Elliot & Harackiewicz 1996; Middleton & Midgley 1997). High levels of approach performance goals are associated with higher aspiration, absorption during on task time, challenge acceptance in task difficulty and high levels of outcomes (Elliot...
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rger work which will attempt to more closely measure and describe the motivational contexts experienced by both males and females without assuming that the motivation of males and females in classrooms will be the same. To this end, that which motivates students is most pertinent. Specifically, this project sought to hear whether factors of motivational resilience (Martin 2002) were expressed in the groups of students in the study sample.

The theoretical basis for the current understanding of adolescent academic motivation comes mainly from survey work conducted in co-educational classes. One of the limitations of the survey method is that the participants’ responses are constrained by the options offered. This study has chosen an open-ended qualitative approach in order to hear the relatively unprompted student conversations about motivation. The term ‘relatively unprompted’ is appropriate since the topic of the investigation and the few questions asked by the facilitator do orient the respondents to the research agenda, yet without constraining their expressions of opinions and thoughts. To tap into the important social and contextual aspects of classroom motivation, the focus group was chosen as an apt method, and its advantages as a social event were consciously exploited in the group meetings of friends. This aspect is further explored in the section headed ‘Interview’.

Method

A small number of secondary schools were approached to participate in this research project. The principal was contacted via a letter and this contact followed by a personal meeting to discuss the research. The University’s ethics requirement of signed parental consent forms was discussed. A member of staff became the research liaison person to handle the distribution and collection of the permission forms. These forms were collected by the principal researcher and recorded. Subsequently, the research team visited the school on agreed days and conducted the focus group interviews. It was not unusual to have four or five focus groups parallel in order to minimise disruption to each year level of the school.

Each focus group consisted of one researcher and four to six students of the same gender and year level of school. A convenient, quiet room was used for each interview group and participants were welcomed to the room and invited to feel comfortable. At the beginning of the group meeting the researcher briefly described the research field, answered questions, asked person to audio tape the conversation and distributed and then collated the signed consent forms of the students. Thus both parental and participant consent was negotiated. The tape recorder used was a relatively small Sony BM21 professional analogue recorder, positioned to maximise the reception of participants’ voices, which was switched on after the permission slips had been collected.

Sample

Twenty one focus groups were conducted with students from three Catholic secondary schools in the Perth metropolitan area. One was a boys’ Years 8 to 12 school, and the other two co-educational schools were chosen to match the socioeconomic and educational profile of the boys’ school. No single sex girls’ school was selected in the sample because the focus was on the boys’ academic motivation. Schools and participants would not be identified in the findings.

In the two co-educational schools focus groups were formed for each gender. This design was so that the boys’ and girls’ experiences would not interact with those of other gender. It was intended to compare the boys’ opinions in single sex and co-educational schools. Table 1 describes the mix of groups conducted.
Table 1 Distribution of Focus Groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year Level</th>
<th>Co-educational schools</th>
<th>Boys’ school</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yr 11</td>
<td>1 girl, 1 boy Yrs11/10</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yr 10</td>
<td>1 girl</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yr 9</td>
<td>1 girl Yrs9/8, 2 boy</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yr 8</td>
<td>1 girl, 1 boy</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>8 (4 girls, 4 boys)</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While efforts were made to balance the number of groups, the sample remains one of convenience. The principal of each school was supportive of the research project; however, recent media attention to the education of boys clearly touched the sensitivities of parents in the boys’ school who responded with great enthusiasm to the research. Rather than limit the number of groups in the boys’ school in order to balance group numbers, it was decided to accept every offer to participate. Each focus group facilitator had to adjust the protocol to fit within the one period of class time allocated by each school for the task and manage the group in a manner conducive to their participation. While group interview times varied from 30 to 55 minutes, most groups had about 45 minutes on the task of the interview.

The Focus Group Interview

Focus groups were formed of secondary school students from the same year level, where possible. Each group was comprised of students who had volunteered to participate and had returned signed parental consent forms. Students were formed into single gender groups along the lines suggested by MacKay (1997, pp. 201-207) for groups of friends well known to each other rather than comparative strangers forming a focus group. MacKay claims that this structure increases the reliability and validity of the data from focus group discussions.

The research assistants were the author’s research students all of whom had completed both a postgraduate research methods unit and practised focus group techniques. The protocol of questions and prompts was developed by the author, workshopped with the research assistants and trialled as a group function. The protocol was modelled on the semi-structured interview and retained flexibility as well as low interviewer speech count. Research assistants were not exposed to literature on academic motivation in order to maximise the listening to the voices of the students.

Students were encouraged to speak plainly. They were told that no names would be reported in the transcript, so even inadvertent names in their talk will not be used or reported. Students were assured that their own names would not be used and their schools would not be identified.

The audio record of each interview was transcribed and the electronic file became input for the qualitative data analysis software N6 (QSR 2002). Facilitator questions will be quoted only when required to understand the students’ responses, and facilitator’s words will be in capital letters in order to unmistakably identify them. When different voices contribute to the same conversion, a line gap separates the speakers. After the whole conversation the group whose conversation has been quoted is identified. Quotes are used so that the reader may access the distinctive voices of the participants whose group only is identified.

Themes were developed through the process of open and axial coding in N6. While discussion with the research assistants was part of their feedback to the author, the analysis of the data has been the sole responsibility of this author.

Findings

There are several main themes from the analysis of the focus group interviews. It may be tempting to suggest that these findings are nothing new: that we might already know these things. Be that as it may, these findings are the expressions of the school students themselves, in their own words, and hence have more ecological validity that might be ascribed to the writings of an arm-chair theorist. Might such

1 Each quote will be identified as a particular gender and year level focus group e.g. ‘Yr 9 boys’ co-ed’ pertains to a group of boys in Year 9 from a co-educational secondary school. ‘Yr 9 girls’ denotes a group from one of the co-educational schools. Similarly, ‘Yr 8 boys’ describes a group of Year 8 boys from the boys’ school.
expressions be merely repeating what they have heard elsewhere? While possible, these expressions come from the verbal sense making of the participants in front of and in cooperation with their same-sex peers. It is unlikely in this forum of friends that what does not square with lived experience and their mutual understandings would survive the examination of their peers. These findings are based on a fair reading of the participants’ contributions and thus do not represent one persons’ view or even one groups’ view.

What the girls say about boys’ learning

To organise these themes, the reflections of the girls’ groups on boys’ learning will be employed. The girls described the boys’ learning and motivation as something different from their own.

They’re all like straight minded, they can’t think outside the square. They have to have everything there for them. [Yr 10 girls]

When asked to unwrap that thought a little further, the same group reflected:

I’ve noticed the boys in my English class tend to like maths better because they don’t like the whole essay writing and things, they don’t understand it, prefer just to do maths so they know exactly what they have to do all the time. [Yr 10 girls]

These girls claim that one of the differences they see in their classes between the genders is the sense of boundaries. Girls might be a little more open to possibilities, whereas boys what you know what the limits of a tasks are and, importantly for the boys as we will later see, how the outcomes will be judged. This sense of reflections can be seen as judgemental, and at times aspects that language intruded.

They're still not mature and they're like into games and things and girls are like more concentrating more focused. [Yr 8 girls]

So the first theme that the girls have identified for us is one of boundaries and known expectations of work outcomes. This theme will be further explored in the boys’ conversations to follow.

Most groups of girls commented upon the competitive spirit boys bring to their learning. In many ways the girls saw this as foreign to their own understanding of how to work in class, while at the same time recognising that this competitiveness was helpful to the boys.

I think that their competitiveness helps them to learn because a lot of them if they didn't have that then they wouldn't really try at all and they'd just sit around and do nothing. [Yr 8 girls]

They usually try and beat their last result or something like that and they usually like socialise with each other and tell each other what they've got and they usually try to do better. [Yr 8 girls]

The second theme identified in the girls’ comments is that of competition in learning and how boys use competition in order to motivate themselves to learn.

The third theme the girls remarked upon was the physicality of learning that boys prefer. Often, the girls discussed this aspect in contrast to writing or reading, and focused on boys’ preferences for sciences, workshop subjects like woodwork and, of course, PE.

Well I have a lot of guy friends … there's like three or four of them, but I mean they don't mind the writing and the reading kind of thing but they would much prefer to be doing, see something in front of them made, than collecting in that sort of information. [Yr 11 girls]

The youngest group of girls echoed this male preference for doing and hands-on activities.

Yes, they like to actually go and do it, experience it rather than just talking about it or writing. [Yr 8 girls]

The third theme of this project is that boys’ learning is more motivated by doing and hands-on activities than by discussion, reading and writing.

What boys say about their own learning motivation

Guided by the expressions of the girls, the three themes that will be explored in this paper are that the learning motivation of boys is improved and focused by:

1. Known and defined expectations and outcomes;
2. Use of competition amongst friends;

3. Hands-on activities and doing.

These themes will be explored using the conversations that the boys had in the focus groups. The focus of these groups was what boys enjoyed learning and how they best learned in their school subjects. Each of the three themes will be explored below.

**Known and defined expectations and outcomes**

The boys expressed a strong sense of being motivated by outcomes of their work. While each gender might like to do well, the boys expressed their motivation in terms of concrete outcomes. The boys spoke about wanting to see that their work lead to useful products

Yeah well you can get in there, you can do like it’s your work, you’re designing it, you’re doing it, it’s whatever you want it to be and then at the end of the day you come up with a good piece of furniture or whatever you’ve made, you’re proud that it’s yours and you made it. So that’s where that comes from.

Yeah you get to take it home at the end of the day when you finish it, it’s your achievement.

You can show your mum.                        [Yr 10 boys]

So it’s yeah, the completed product that interests me. When I start building something I really look forward to finishing it.                        [Yr 11 boys]

This sense of the finished product which is useful motivates the boys. Much of the conversation about usefulness revolved around the practical subjects, since not all boys understood the practicality of other ‘academic’ subjects like Mathematics and English.

Oh once again that’s like you’re just writing, you’re doing one thing, just writing on a piece of paper you’re not actually physically getting a piece of metal, bending it.

Well you don’t actually get to create something of your own. In arts you can create something which you can like show and keep.                        [Yr 10 boys]

From these conversations with groups of boys came a very strong sense of requiring direction in their learning. All the boys were engaged in classes in English, Mathematics, Sciences and Social Sciences and knew that they had to do well in these subjects in order to succeed. Their markers of success varied from being accepted into a good apprenticeship to gaining entry to a particular university course or even making lots of money in a job they admired. None of these boys expressed themselves in ways that were naïve of the requirements they faced to succeed in school subjects.

This research asked about what, in this case, motivated the boys to work well or better. Answering this question, the boys’ groups talked about clear directions for outcomes. They felt that when they had a clear understanding of exactly what they needed to know in order to succeed they were best able to focus their energies.

A teacher I used to have for science, I had for the first semester, he’s a really good teacher. He teaches you what you need to know, he doesn’t like just lead off. He goes directly to what you need, doesn’t linger off and just babble about something that you don’t even know. Like he gets straight to the point and like when I had him I was on good grades and now, when we’ve got this new teacher, my grades have started to slip.                        [Yr 10 boys]

This conversation suggests that targeting learning may help boys learn better. If it is possible to clearly identify not only the task and its parameters, but also the grading scale so that each student has an understanding of how his/her work will be marked and that their prediction of the marking is reinforced, then boys especially may find it easier to motivate themselves. Boys may need a more careful explanation of why a particular learning task is useful and even practical, and how learning this task will help them achieve better tangible outcomes.

There is a little evidence in these conversations that boys, more than girls, wanted rewards.

Rewards like lollies, they always help every single time because everyone wants to do well just they forget it.                        [Yr 8 boys, co-ed]
It's just writing, like it's all just writing, like open your book to this page, finish it, I'll give you a work sheet, finish it, then you leave, then you've got another double and you do some more of that, then you leave. Then the next day you go back and do some more. [Yr 9 boys, co-ed]

There is a lot of evidence that boys wanted to see tangible outcomes from their work and sometimes external rewards may have been the only tangible outcomes offered. There is clearly a problem that boys discuss about the lack of perceived value in the tasks they are required to do in classrooms. The boys' focus on substantial outcomes may be constructed as a problem, not so much of boys wanting external rewards, but more likely an unfortunate structuring and conversation with boys about rewards which has offered external inducements instead of highlighting appropriate and concrete outcomes from their learning.

**Use of competition amongst friends**

It has been argued elsewhere that competition in classrooms has some positive perspectives (Vallance 2004). The common observation that adolescent males are competitive is echoed in classrooms. This section attempts to unwrap how the males understand their competition within their learning situations.

Sometimes you try to beat your best friends in the marks.

Q: **WHY?**
It's just fun.

Q: **NOW FUN: DO YOU MEAN IT'S NOT REALLY ALL THAT SERIOUS?**
No it's just like, I don't know, can't really explain it.
The marks are serious but like the result if you beat your friend, it's not that important. [Yr 9 boys, co-ed]

Competition between mates is seen as part and parcel of the classroom environment. To many boys it is a natural part of their experience. Clearly, at times, there can be instances when competition is inappropriate. The boys in this sample are arguing, however, that many times they use competition in order to lift their own motivation. Firstly competition of this helpful sort is between friends and it is casual or part of the learning environment rather than dominating the learning exclusively.

There is a sense of malarky about this competition. The participants know that it is 'it's just fun' and offers an opportunity to rejoice in one's achievements, knowing that one cannot take it too seriously as the Yr 10 boy below theatrically comments.

It’s good to have a little rivalry between friends and you can like give them heaps if you beat them and likewise when they beat you.
I suppose it can make things interesting but it’s not the number one priority. Doing what you can the best is definitely the thing that you have to go after. (theatrically, and humorously) Because we’re like friends we’re the smartest people in our uniform, we know everything. [Yr 10 boys]

The exchange below, from a different group of Yr 10 boys, emphasises that the competition is within a framework of relationship, 'one of your friends'. This winning is also recognised as momentary, and supporting one's enthusiasm. One could almost suggest that this process was one way of maintaining and promoting these relationships.

With competition you are always trying to beat someone, it’s usually not someone you don’t like it’s usually one of your friends so that you can act superior to them and usually doesn’t last very long but it just makes you feel good that you’ve managed to beat them. [Yr 10 boys]

But if depends if you enjoy the subject or not. Because if you’re in a subject that you don’t like and someone is getting higher grades than you, you wouldn’t really care. But if you’re in something that you enjoy it, if you got beaten in a running race and you really enjoy running, then you try even harder to win the race next time, instead of just sitting back and saying oh well I don’t care because I don’t like the subject. Things you enjoy make you, the subjects you enjoy make you strive to get better and better at them and do better. [Yr 10 boys]
This third group of less able Yr 10 boys make the point that the subject itself is an issue. Competition between mates is a positive thing when the males like the class. If the class is not enjoyed, for whatever reason, then disengagement is more frequent. It is important that these boys like the subject before they get engaged with the learning, and once engaged, they are capable of bringing a sporting enthusiasm to the tasks of learning.

Some of us know that we’re not going to reach number one ever but you know, if we try our hardest and we feel like, this may sound a bit corny, but we’re actually number one in ourselves. You know, because we’ve tried our hardest, we’ve achieved what ever goal we’ve set, we feel happy.

But I also believe that doing your best may not have the same amount of, makes you feel good about yourself if you don’t beat everybody else. Because if you just ‘I did my best’ it’s not like you’re the first in the class or something and beaten everybody else, and you’re better than everybody else. [Yr 11 boys]

This group of Yr 11 boys directly connect positive competition with a healthy self-esteem. Recognising that not all will achieve at the highest levels, this speaker recognises the importance of internalising achievements. The second speaker recognises the value of personal achievements and a personal validation of doing one’s best, while tempering it with the reality that coming first is still achieving most.

These brief paragraphs tell us that the boys sampled have a clear sense that competition is part of their learning environment. They actively use competition between and among friends to motivate their efforts to do well in the subjects they like. When things are going reasonably well: friendships groups healthy; positive learning environment and reasonable task difficulty, the boys say that competition is a useful means of promoting adolescent boys’ engagement in school tasks.

**Hands-on activities and doing.**

The third theme to come from the girls’ conversations of boys’ learning is that boys like to have a hands-on experience in their classroom learning. In speaking about the subjects they liked (science, art, cooking, wood and/or metal work) the boys emphasised the enjoyment value.

Q: **WHY DO YOU LIKE THESE SUBJECTS?**
Because they’re fun, you get to do what you really like.

You get to do activities, like not just written work.

Q: **SO SOME OF YOU SAID THAT YOU LIKE SCIENCE, WHY DO YOU LIKE SCIENCE?**
Because you get to do experiments.

Q: **WHY DO YOU LIKE EXPERIMENTS?**
Because you actually get to do all the stuff not just hear about it in the books.

Yeah you learn more by doing that. [Yr 8 boys co-ed]

The enjoyment was not just ‘fun’, nor was it solely related to the increased sense of freedom ‘what you really like’. The contrast with written work is actually two-fold: there is the doing and also the learning through doing. these boys, and further examples below, are convinced that they learn better by doing rather than by writing and listening. Their comments are an appeal to be active learners in ways that the boys consider to be active. Implicit in this construction is the boys’ sense that listening and writing are not active modes of learning.

(About liking science) Yeah they do practicals and stuff like that.

So it’s not just the writing, we get to do things in science experiments and stuff.

You actually get to see how it works.

Not just writing about how it works. [Yr 9 boys co-ed]

The Yr 9 boys focus on their learning, rather than just the fun aspect of practical work. Their claim of actually seeing how it works is familiar to anyone who has taken a complex item or gadget apart to see how it works and been pleased when it also works on re-assembly! The older Yr 10 boys below introduce two significant components of understanding: that hands-on learning encourages a sense of problem solving and independent, self-directed learning.

Well doing like you’re not just listening to someone giving out instructions and then just writing it down on a piece of paper, you’re actually thinking for yourself instead of. Like maths there’s like a set question and a set answer but in other
subjects you can have, it’s more problem solving. Like in metal work you can have like a piece of metal and you’ve got to work out how to bend it the right shape and all that kind of stuff. It’s like you’re still thinking about it but it’s more you, it’s not the teacher involved as much, or the class involved as much. [Yr 10 boys]

Well say with cooking like if you just look at the method you don't really understand what happens between the two ingredients but like when you do it, say you put the milk with the flour, you can see that it becomes into this batter. So you like understand what happens between the two ingredients, it's not just this happens, you actually understand why.

Yes because you can't taste the food by looking at the ingredients or by reading it, you have to do it to taste it. [Yr 8 boys]

The Western Australian curriculum document Curriculum Framework is grounded in an outcomes-based approach to learning in the classroom. It seems that the Yr 8 boys above have grasped this approach quite well. These boys are claiming that their best learning includes and even requires experiencing ‘what you turn up with’. This does not diminish the challenge, and may even increase the challenge by requiring individual action (cf Yr 10 boys above). These boys, quoted below, make two further significant points. Their first point is that hands-on activities mean that they learn at their own pace. Their second point targets deep learning: that their hands-on approach allows them to learn in a manner that enables them to understand and complete follow-up work, whereas they find that written work, while maybe giving some immediate understanding, has the risk of being relatively shallow learning.

Like metal tech they give you what you need, the instructions and what you need instructions and they’ll let you do it. So it’s like a challenge for you to do it. It's hard but you still want to do it. It's like you can see what you turn up with in the end.

Hands on you can like learn at your own pace. Like with like writing it straight down you sort of have to understand it straight away or like you don't understand like follow up work and that. [Yr 8 boys]

This third theme of hands-on activity addresses a significant factor in boys’ learning. The boys spoke about how hands-on activities encouraged their engagement with the tasks and developed their participation by making it their own work rather than teacher directed work. While this initial effect was powerful, so were the outcomes of a more deep learning approach by doing that encouraged boys to experience rather than mentally accept [by listening and reading] the learning outcomes. This hands-on, active learning is the boys’ attempt at deep learning so that what they learn is embedded in their practice and experience.

Conclusions

This research project has adopted what might seem to be an unconventional method of sampling. Using groups of single gender in co-educational schools and requesting that friendship links be maintained in the groups’ formation has given focus groups which are judged to be of high reliability and validity in terms of the students’ expressed opinions. Furthermore, the girls’ perception of their male classmates’ learning preferences has been used to organise the analysis of the boys’ expressed opinions.

The boys clearly prefer clear statements of learning objectives. The less predictable subjects, where the criteria of assessment are not so objective, at least in the boys’ eyes, are also less well appreciated. Those subjects which lend themselves to clearly defined outcomes, physical products or processes are more highly esteemed as worthwhile learning by these boys.

This research has further strengthened the argument that boys use competition between friends in a positive manner which is captured in the performance-approach goal orientation. This use of competition encouraged deep learning and high levels of engagement with the tasks as long as the boys liked the subject. Two factors pertaining to any competition are both important to the boys: the competitors are to be friends and hence they take this competition as part of the discourse of friendship, and that the subject itself must already be valued in its own right.

Thirdly, this research has reinforced the common assertion that boys like to be active. Not only do boys like to be doing things, they find that doing better helps them understand a process than does merely reading about, or listening to, an explanation of the process. There is a masculine sense of learning through doing.
that these boys express as their preferred means of engaging with content matters in school. Those subjects which least open themselves to hands-on activities are also those which many boys least enjoy.

The research project has not shed much light on academic and motivational resilience. It may be that the groups formed did not have enough time to explore this area, or that the boys’ constructs of motivation did not permit them to engage with the questions designed to tap into motivational resilience. Resilience needs to be pursued in further studies.

Lastly, this project has shown that there is positive benefit in discussing classroom behaviours and attitudes in separate gender groups. As the performance of boys in academic settings is further explored, the desirability and usefulness of single gender samples becomes increasingly obvious and informative. None of this is to say that the opinions of one gender are to be preferred over the other gender, but it is to recognise that each gender has a particular perspective and researchers will be well served to honour the perspectives insights and opinions of both males and females in classrooms. In most cases it seems clear that honouring such differences is readily achieved by privileging the discourse of each gender to be heard within its own context, rather than mixed, and possibly confused, in co-educational groups.

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