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In the Social Sciences, we use both quantitative (statistics) and qualitative (observing and listening) methods. The two can be used together to complement one another, and in my investigation of the differences in classroom participation and overall self-efficacy of girls enrolled in coeducational versus single-sex math classes I used a mixed-method research design.

There are distinct advantages that are realized from using a combination of different methodologies. First, sociological research and inquiry is concerned

with both theoretical knowledge and the application of findings in practice. Research that combines methodologies increases the potential of the study to address both of these ends. For example, qualitative research is often concerned with process as well as outcomes; descriptive accounts provide a means of drawing parallels and contrasts between the phenomena being investigated and theoretical paradigms. Quantitative research seeks to measure and evaluate the phenomena or construct of interest, and provide a means for generalization and reproduction by other researchers.

Within the context of my study, I planned to collect the quantitative data through selected-response survey and the charting of classroom participation through observation. Through tracking classroom participation I would be able to measure how often students in the class raised their hands or called out answers. The qualitative data would come through the observation of classroom behaviors and through interviews with female students from which I would be able to glean explanations of the behavior that I had observed. Together, the complementary information gathered

from both quantitative and qualitative methods would create an understanding of the culture of secondary educational settings and the context of peer socialization within that learning environment. I knew that the qualitative data would be the more difficult to gather,

but I had no idea just how challenging it would be...

Valerie Janesick in *"Stretching" Exercises for Qualitative Researchers* (1998) suggests that qualitative research is much like dance and in preparing to undertake such data collection one must learn to stretch accordingly. Though her warm-up exercises were not exactly what I had in mind, the idea stuck with me that field research requires

stretching, preparation, and an overall limbering up before taking the field—more like sport than dance, but essentially the same idea. When we undertake observations most of us look for a means of being unobtrusive and non-reactive. That is, we try very hard not to become a part of what we are studying and definitely aim not to have any effect on it. We want to be invisible and detached; we want to be scientists with the world as our laboratory.

To undertake my dissertation fieldwork and data collection I moved to the rural northern outreaches of Maine to undertake research in a public coeducational High School that offered an all-girls math class for ninth grade Algebra I students. It had taken months to find a location and procure an invitation, but with my letter in hand from the Superintendent of Schools I arrived at Northern Maine High School (NMHS) in Largetown, ME (all names of people and locations have been changed to protect their identities). I planned to observe student classroom behaviors to understand the differences between single-sex and coeducation math learning environments. I thought I would walk in,



watch some classes, interview students and get down to writing. I never anticipated that it would be difficult to undertake the fieldwork, nor did I think I would struggle once I limbered up.

Day one at NMHS: I arrived before the school-day started and headed in to meet the principal, administrative staff, and the math department. Everyone greeted me warmly, though with distance befitting my place as a guest and not a new permanent resident of the school. I was officially an outsider. No one seemed to understand exactly what my agenda really was, or at least they did not trust it, or me for that matter. I headed from the offices to my first class of the day, ready to watch classroom participation in action. Instead of my watching students, however, they seemed to insist on watching me, staring at me quizzically and trying to figure out why I was there and who I actually was. Clearly I was not a student; well, I might have been, they could not really be sure. And, I was not a teacher, or I might be; they did not know. Instead of asking, students just avoided me. They stared and then quickly shifted their gazes when I would catch them. Each math teacher introduced me as a classroom guest, and provided no additional information, as I had requested until I was ready to be unveiled as a researcher. If I learned anything on the first day it was that other teachers in the school had no idea who I was; I was reprimanded for using the faculty bathrooms, twice.

Day two at NMHS: I arrived at school with the students, just in time for class. I headed up to the Math Department Head's classroom for homeroom, just to acquaint myself further with the space and get ready for the first period class. I took a seat in the back of the room with my notebook spread across the desk and a pencil, ready to write it all down. Homeroom ended and math class began, new students shuffling in to the room and looking at me quizzically. I heard one whisper to another, "She's back again?" The second girl shrugged and they headed to their desks. The class focused on watching work on the board, answering questions, and in general trying to look back at me to catch glimpses of what I was doing back there. The rest of the day was pretty much the same. I talked with one of the teachers after class and thanked him again for letting me be there. He let me know that it was not his decision and I left feeling less than welcome. In the next class the teacher was more encouraging and interested in my work. Unfortunately, I could not tell her much about it because I feared that it would affect my outcomes. I maintained my position as an outsider, remaining distant for the sake of my research.

My second week was more or less the same each day—I arrived when the students did, observed math classes, and generally tried to stay out of the way for the most part. Other teachers were introduced to me at the faculty meeting at week's end. I received numerous apologies for misunderstandings and was made to feel more welcome, especially when the principal insisted that everyone treat me as if I were a member of the faculty. This began to open doors at the Guidance Office and to necessary information about the school and community, but it did not change my status with the students, the group that I most needed to observe and interact with for my research.

My third week at NMHS I observed each of my math classes another three times and was ready to begin the first round of interviews. I was really excited and made arrangements with the first student, Lizzy. I had her consent and assent forms in hand and we met in a spare conference room down the hall from the main office. She came in looking somewhat put off by having to miss part of her study hall, but sat down and filled out the surveys that I slid across the table to her. When she finished, she passed them back over to me and asked if we were finished. I said no and explained about the interview. She nodded and I started the tape recorder. Less than fifteen minutes later she was out the door and I was worried. If this is what interviews were going to be like, then I was in trouble. For each question I asked, I received the shortest answer possible. Some were only an utterance of a syllable and did not even answer the questions. It was clear to me that my biggest hurdle was trust. She did not know me, was not sure she liked me, and definitely did not trust me. Crest-fallen, I left school and went home to mull over my options as my dreams of writing my dissertation and graduating started to slip away.

The next day it was back to observations on the muddiest day of the year. Monday it had rained in biblical proportions turning everything into running streams of mud. By Tuesday it was sunny and the ground was sticky—the kind of mud that swallows your shoes whole and you can only hope that you tied them tight enough to extricate them from the goo. I headed up to my first class of the day and took my seat in the back of the room. Students at this point had moved on to overtly ignoring me. They still did not really understand why I was in their classes, but they chose to focus on more pressing things. Class started with the teacher at the front of the room writing volumes of math on the blackboard. The boys in the back of the room were restless and noisy, perhaps a product of the weather. Mr. Thomason, the math teacher whose classroom I was invading, called over his shoulder (without turning)

telling his students to be quiet. Then, everything in the classroom began to change. I looked up just in time to see something whiz past my desk and strike the student in front of me in the back of the head. At first I thought that I had imagined it because he barely even flinched. Instead, the struck student whipped around toward the source of the projectile and grinned. He then reached down and plucked mud off of the sole of his boots, glanced at the front of the room, and proceeded to hurl the mud back at the instigator. A roll of quiet laughter passed around the room as students started shifting in their seats to watch the show. Again Mr. Thomason called over his shoulder for quiet and continued to write on the board. Bedlam ensued—bits of mud flew from every corner of the room—until finally Mr. Thomason turned around. Every student looked purposefully at their teacher, their books, or their hands, unflinching. Then the math lesson began as if the mud had never flown.

At the end of class one of the mud-slingers slid his chair up next to mine and said, “Hey!” I raised my eyebrows surprised that he was addressing me, and said, “Hey.” He went on to say, “So, um, you’re not going to tell him, are you?” Knowing that this was about the mud, I said, “Nope. That’s not my job.” This evoked a smile. He then asked, “So, you’re not a teacher?” I answered no, and explained that I was a researcher looking at math learning in classrooms (a stretch, but not a lie). He then jumped up out of his chair and started telling his friends as they left the room, “Nope, she’s cool, we’re good.”

Later that same afternoon I had my second interview scheduled. Sarah walked in and smiled, sat down and started to fill out the surveys waiting there for her. When she finished she asked if I was going to interview her. I told her yes, and she nodded. I started the tape recorder and began asking questions about math and why she chose her class. She answered my questions, but went on from there. “Well, I chose my class because, well like, there’s this kid and I knew he’d be in there,” she explained. “And then there’s my friends...” Instead of simple one-word answers she told me about her friends, boyfriends, friends’ boyfriends. She talked about her parents, and her older sister. She talked to me like she had nothing to lose, like she knew that what she told me was not going to be repeated to anyone else. At the end of the interview she got up to leave and as she reached the door turned back in a moment of recognition and said, “So that mud thing in first period was pretty funny huh?” and left. I sat there grinning, laughing to myself and wondering how quickly rumors, stories, and information in general moved around the ninth grade circles of the NMHS. Sarah was not even in

that first period class, she did not see the mud, and she did not even see my reaction to the mud. Obviously she had heard that I did not tell on the boys. But something had changed; I was no longer a completely unknown quantity, I was trustworthy.

Interviews over the next couple of weeks gave me insight that I would never have picked up just sitting in the back of the room. I was invited to have lunch with different kids on different days. Students came up to me and asked me if I was going to soccer games or school events.

They started to seek me out, and they always showed up for their interviews. And not once, after that first interview, did another consist of single syllable answers. I learned about “Lesbian Math,” the moniker eighth grade boys attached to the all-girls math class that followed it to the High School, a student code that neither the principal, nor any of the math teachers had ever heard. I heard about breakups, and how talking in class was really bad when your boyfriend does not do as well on math exams as you do. I heard about violence at home, parents’ divorces, and fights with both friends and boyfriends. Girls came to their interviews where I asked them about math and they went on to talk about their lives. All of this because of a little mud-slinging? Hard to tell, but what would I have missed if I had walked into the classroom as a referee instead of a member of the team? Or, if I had forgotten to stretch, and pulled a mental muscle, leaving me on the sideline with perfunctory information and nothing more interesting than that? I would have missed Lesbian Math, and perhaps so much more. No matter how much you prepare before entering the field you often cannot engineer that moment of fitting in or being accepted as a member of the community. Just when you least expect it a little mud-slinging might just help you go the distance.



Note: thanks to Principal George Ferro of the Whitman, MA Public Schools for the photographs in this article.

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