National Education Longitudinal Study, a nationally representative data set of 24,599 eighth-grade students from the United States. Although the data set is somewhat dated, it was used because it is one of the few which collect information from each student’s teachers in two different subjects, making it possible to employ the estimation strategy he uses.

Because Prof. Dees’ studies are today, widely regarded as among the most influential and highly cited in the teacher gender literature, hold on them, by using the same data set but adding additional controls for various teacher and class characteristics. My results support his findings. I find that male students are more likely to be taught by a teacher of the opposite sex.

More importantly, the academic achievement for both male and female students depends on teacher gender. In particular, assignment to a teacher of the opposite sex is associated with a higher average of standardized scores by boys and by 0.1 standard deviation better than students who do not. Hence, the effect of having a teacher of the opposite sex is about 30 percent to 60 percent of the effect of speaking English at home.

Prof. Dees’ findings, particularly that same-sex teachers improve female student outcomes, are also supported by other studies which use randomized controlled experiments, such as those done by Prof. Seong Ee Chee, who randomized students to same-sex teachers and found they performed better. These results are consistent with the findings of Prof. Dees.

What are the implications of these findings for schools? We should segregate students and teachers by gender? I do not think this is the main takeaway. In fact, the results say nothing about the likely consequences of not having students and teachers by gender.

One possible reason is the equal, assignment to a teacher of the same sex has a positive effect on a child’s academic performance. However, a policy of segregating students and teachers by gender, as is necessary for the learning environment, would be so altered that the “all equal” condition no longer holds. What we should instead take away from these findings is that gender interactions between students and teachers is a matter of fact that they care more about.

Are there reasons to believe that Prof. Dees’ findings, widely held, based on the data he collected in the United States, could apply to Singapore? Since the way in which classroom instruction is organised is broadly similar.

Having a clear understanding of how teachers and students interact will enable schools to formulate appropriate policies to address any potential gender effects.

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This is a monthly series by the NUS Department of Economics. Each month, an article is written on an economic topic. For a burning question on economics, write to stopin@phg.com.sg with “Ask ‘Ainan’” in the subject field.