

A STUDY OF SINGLE-GENDER CLASSROOMS

In our current society, education is perhaps one of our greatest concerns. It is education that grows us and empowers us with the tools needed for a successful life. It is also at schools, the centers of education, that we learn the tenets of behavior and social interaction. Due to education's importance, a number of related issues have arisen, issues like standardized testing, violence in schools, and what classes students are expected to take. Issues such as these are good, for they help us to improve our system of education and make it a better one for future generations. In this paper, I examine but one of these issues, the separation of classes by gender.

The simplified, general opinion of single-gender classrooms is that single-gender classes create a more educationally focused environment at the cost of hindering students' social development. But is this evaluation correct, and, in light of their advantages and disadvantages, are single-gender classrooms worth creating in public schools?

To answer this question, one must look at both aspects of education – a student's academic and social performance. While the American school may have been primarily intended to educate children academically, it has since its creation come to fulfill an entirely new role, the role of educating them socially. Through the eight hours students spend every day at school, they come to form behaviors, morals, and rules of social interaction that will be carried on, at least in part, into adulthood. Thus, when considering changes like single-gender classrooms, schools must consider both the academic and social impacts which will result.

With this in mind, I have analyzed the topic through seven scholarly journal articles found through the database INSPIRE, and have further explored the issue with field research of my own. Through this research, I have become convinced that single-gender classrooms are capable of improving student achievement not only inside the classroom, but, in many cases,

outside of it as well.

A good place to begin examining the educational value of gender separation are the classes in which each gender is typically weakest – that is, language and arts for boys, and math and science for girls. If single-gender schooling is better than co-education, it should do a better job of educating students in those areas in which they are naturally deficient.

This issue is addressed in a study examining the results of the 2003 Mississippi Curriculum Test, taken every year by students of grades two through eight. The study analyzed the scores of students from single-sex and co-educational classrooms in the areas of reading, language arts, and math. Reading and language arts showed no significant difference between the two groups of girls. However, boys in single-sex classrooms were, 97% of the time, at advanced and proficient levels in reading, as opposed to 85% for co-educational boys. Language and arts saw 88% of boys in single-sex classrooms at advanced and proficient levels, with co-educational boys at 70% (Laster 61). For math, girls in single-sex classrooms only slightly outperformed their co-educational counterparts (94% against 92%), while boys in single-sex classrooms actually did worse than co-educational boys (84% against 90%) (Laster 62).

This data seems to suggest that students of single-sex classes will improve in their gender's "weak area," though the study does so rather unconvincingly for girls. Additionally, the analysis of boys' math scores appears to suggest that an all-boys math class will actually see a decline in student grades.

But what is it about single-gender classrooms that is causing these results? Ursula Kessels and Bettina Hannover attempted to answer this through their comprehensive study of single-gender and co-educational students. Their theory, which the results of the study confirmed, was that students of single-sex classrooms perform better in their gender's weak area

due to the limited accessibility of gender-related self-knowledge in a single-sex classroom (276). Essentially, if students' classrooms contain only one gender, it not only becomes much more difficult for them to distinguish these "weak areas," but it is also less discouraging to the student when everyone else is similarly disadvantaged. Thus, students' self-concept of their ability increases, and in turn, so does their performance. It should also be noted that students of single-sex classrooms were found to be less knowledgeable of stereotypical gender traits and slower to recognize them (280).

Does this mean that a single-sex classroom can achieve better results only by isolating its students entirely from the other gender, as in a military school? Not at all. The phenomenon Kessels and Hannover found in single-sex schools is not a defeminization or demasculinization of students. Rather, single-sex classrooms simply allow students to develop their personalities naturally, rather than be pressured by the stereotypes of their gender. This freedom is not necessarily a good or bad thing, but it is more feasible than complete isolation from the opposite gender.

Joseph and Granleese, in their study of over four hundred adolescent girls from Northern Irish co-educational and single-gender schools, further examined the self-perception of students from each type of classroom. They divided self-perception into five domains – scholastic competence, behavioral conduct, social acceptance, athletic competence, and physical appearance – and derived scores for each based on students' responses to the thirty-six items on the questionnaire. These five domains can be further divided into two clusters. Scholastic competence and behavioral conduct are domains that are not as gender-specific and of which parents are more concerned than the students themselves. Social acceptance, athletic competence, and physical appearance are domains that are more gender-specific and are valued

more so by the students than by their parents (526). The questionnaire found a clear leaning of girls in single-sex classrooms to exhibit a higher level of self-perception in the first cluster, while co-educational girls were shown to possess increased self-perception in the second cluster. When determining students' global self-worth in general, there was no significant gap between the two groups (527).

So, because of this idea of gender-related self-knowledge and its deficiency in single-gender classrooms, girls who attend a single-sex classroom are more likely to improve their behavior and scholastic competence, while girls who attend a co-educational classroom are more likely to improve their athletic ability and social acceptance. Again, this distinction does not clearly favor either option of schooling, but it does show that each has its own unique advantages.

But in general, which provides students with a better education – single-sex or co-educational schooling? A number of studies have attempted to answer this question, most of which appear to favor single-gender education. However, the question is not so easily answered, because the majority of these studies examine situations where the separation of genders has little or nothing to do with student success. Typically, the quality of the school or the natural ability of its students distorts the results of these studies, making the answers they provide effectively invalid (Robinson and Smithers 23).

To remedy this situation, Dr. Pamela Robinson and Alan Smithers performed a study that was not subject to these flaws. They found that, when comparing single-sex and co-educational schools that are, in all other aspects, as similar as possible, the apparent advantage of single-sex schools largely disappears. Ultimately, the separation of genders itself has no statistically significant effect on students' educational success in single-gender schools (31).

Yet this does not mean that the decision to attend a single-sex or co-educational school is meaningless, even if one is concerned only with the academic aspect of education. Single-sex and co-educational schools may, in general, be equally effective, but individuals will often find a certain option to be more educationally suitable for them, as Robinson and Smithers determined through the responses of the forty-eight girls they interviewed during their study. While several interviewees said they valued the opportunity to work with boys, grow up with them, and exchange points of view, others complained that the boys were less focused and messed around too much. Several girls also admitted that the boys were distracting, while others found the all-girls environment “overcompetitive” and “bitchy” (40).

Of course, to fully evaluate single-sex and educational schools, one must look beyond the academic aspect of education. Students’ social education must also be examined. In the aforementioned study, Robinson and Smithers also attempted to evaluate both methods of schools in this area of social education. More specifically, they wanted to determine if students of single-sex schools had greater difficulty in adjusting to life at a university – a setting in which the other gender is frequently present. Interestingly, however, when dividing those who found the adjustment difficult into their respective educational backgrounds, there was, once again, no significant statistical difference between students of single-sex and co-educational schools. Surprisingly, while some students of single-gender classrooms found themselves uneasy in the presence of the other gender, most of the interviewees found it to be a comfortable transition; several even welcomed the change (43).

Since gender roles are not as clearly presented in a single-gender environment, students of single-gender classrooms are more likely to explore career opportunities they would otherwise avoid. For example, women from single-sex schools are twice as likely to take a

science-related career as women from co-educational schools (McCollum 19).

Further, women from single-sex schools have also been found to pursue advanced degrees and positions of leadership more frequently. Of all female board members of Fortune 500 companies – a listing of the largest companies in the United States –, one third of them graduated from single-sex institutions (McCollum 19). Similarly, John Kerry, Al Gore, George W. Bush, and his father all attended single-gender schools, and it can hardly be said that they were unprepared for the real world (Horton 3).

Tom Fortney, a former teacher at Le Mans academy, also found that students formed closer friendships and were more responsive to the teachers in an all-boys setting. So while it is possible that students of single-gender classrooms may lose social confidence around the other gender, this loss is made up for, at least in part, by an increase in confidence around members of one's own gender.

Do these advantages make up for the potential problems of single-sex schooling in the area of social confidence? For some, yes, but for what I suspect to be the majority, no.

Yet this distinction is no more conclusive than the distinctions made concerning scholastic achievement. If Robinson and Smithers are correct, it is very rare that a single-sex student feels socially unprepared for “the real world,” and rarer still that this lack of preparation largely outweighs the other social benefits of single-sex education. The number of single-sex graduates who have become board members for Fortune 500 companies shows that the scales can also be easily aligned in favor of single-sex schooling.

It is true that, with regard to students' level of social confidence, co-educational schools are, on average, probably a step or two ahead of single-sex schools, but more significant and more clear is that neither method of schooling is strictly better than the other in this way. Some

students may find their social confidence at a higher level with co-education, while others may find single-sex schooling to be the better choice.

Looking at both aspects of education together – social and academic – and the comparisons made in each area, it becomes apparent that there is no universal means of determining which method of schooling is superior.

So, in light of this idea of each school type having its own advantages and disadvantages, we return to the idea of single-gender *classrooms*, rather than entire schools. Such classrooms do already exist, but they are rather rare, as many schools are still tentative about the idea.

The basic concept of single-gender classrooms is to take the educational advantages of single-gender schooling without the social disadvantages that would normally follow. Of course, there are, as previously stated, still students who find no educational advantage in a single-gender setting, just as there are students who find that strictly single-sex schools or co-educational classrooms increase their level of social confidence more than single-sex classrooms do. For this reason, single-gender classrooms must be made optional, so that students will not be required to take a single-gender class if it does not benefit them.

One decision to avoid, however, is to make elective, non-universal classes like auto mechanics or child development single-gender, as this discriminates against the gender that is not allowed to take them (Spielhagen 72).

These are merely projections, of course; schools will still need to test the concept of single-gender classrooms for themselves and get an idea of which single-gender classrooms are the most popular in their region, or which ones are more effective than their co-educational equivalents. There may be failures along the way, so schools should take the transition slowly and be prepared for such failings.

Ultimately, the issue of separation of genders in schools is a matter of choice. Students should be given the choice to attend co-educational schools, and the choice to take the electives they need. As much as possible, they should be given the choice to take single-gender classes at a mixed school, and the choice to attend a school that is entirely single-gender. Students should also be encouraged to try out some single-gender classrooms in middle school. Then, when high school comes, they can make an informed decision as to which type of classroom would benefit them more.

I cannot say that single-gender classes will produce better results than co-educational classes, but I would argue that they can. As these studies have shown, there is no “best” system of education. Some students were shown to benefit more from co-education, while others were shown to benefit more in a single-gender educational setting. Offering individual single-gender classrooms will allow students to conservatively experiment with the single-gender setting, making it possible for them to find the system of education that will best prepare them for the real world.

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