

**SINGLE OR CO-EDUCATIONAL SCHOOLS: SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS FOR
THE FUTURE OF THE FAMILY**

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ABSTRACT

This paper considered single sex and co-educational schools as they affect future family life. Choice of schools to a large extent has a range of social outcomes for girls and boys at school and for men and women as they progress through life. The outcomes in future family life examined include gender equality, sexuality, marriage, child bearing, attitudes to gender roles and general wellbeing. The paper examined advantages and disadvantages of both types of schooling, bearing in mind variations in cultural settings and religious affiliations. The author observed that there is little research on the long term social consequences of single sex and co-educational schooling. Nevertheless, many advocates of co-education argued that mixed schools are essential so that boys and girls can learn to live and work together. In general, their argument is that schools should reflect real life and as society is mixed, schools should also be mixed. Advocates of single sex schools on the other hand, argued differently. The paper therefore recommended that parents and guardians should weigh the relative advantages and disadvantages of both types of schooling and decide appropriately in the context of their socio cultural settings and religious faith.

Key terms: single sex schools, co-educational schools, future family life.

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Introduction

The debate about the advantages and disadvantages of single sex and co-educational schooling has received considerable attention over the past five to six decades around the world. Although research and reviews of the benefits of single sex verses co-educational schooling had been undertaken around the world, mostly Australia, Canada, England, new Zealand, Northern Ireland and USA, the results are equivocal. In other words, there is lack of consistent evidence about the advantages of one school type over the other. However, one emerging fact is that the effects of single sex schooling on future family life cannot be evaluated in a vacuum. The social and cultural content of the school needs to be taking into consideration. The vast majority of research reports according to Sullivan (2011) has been published on the question of the merits of single sex and coeducational schooling, but has focused primarily on the aspect of academic attainment. This paper seeks to address the imbalance by asking whether single sex and co-educational schooling were linked to a range of social outcomes both during adolescence and later in adulthood.

The United Kingdom has a long history of single sex education. Traditionally, British secondary schools were single sex. However, the progressive school movement in the early 20th century and Dale's later influential Work (Dale, 1969, 1971 & 1974) both stressed the advantages of boys being educated with girls. Dale argued that boys did better academically in mixed schools because girls' greater industrious nature was influential to them, and boys were spurred on by competition with the girls. However, academic attainment was not Dale's only or perhaps even his central concern. He was interested in relationships between the

sexes and in promoting what he saw as hearty relationships. In Dale's view, mixed Sex schooling is more natural and provided protection against homosexuality. He presented evidence suggesting that boys and girls in mixed-sex schools have more positive and friendly attitudes towards one another, and that as adults there were likely to believe in the equality of the sexes and to have happier marriages than graduates of single sex schools. Much of this evidence was based on selected open-ended responses and there was no claim that the survey was representative. A study by Atherton (1973) using a retrospective data also suggested that men and women who have attended co-educational schools had happier marriages.

Parents who choose single sex schooling for their daughters invoke a range of considerations and raised diverse issues including equal opportunities and anxieties regarding female sexuality, while the parents of boys often perceive co-educational schooling as a positive socializing force (Ball and Gewirtz, 1997).

The social aims of schooling are often invoked both by the supporters and opponents of single sex schooling, yet this is an area where strong opinions thrive in the absence of much evidence.

Arguments in Favour of Single- Sex Schooling

Sullivan (2011) observed that throughout the history of gender and education, schools have been viewed as an important site for social change and places to foster the development of more equal societies with less oppressive social conditions for women. There are different ways to approach the question about the benefits of single-sex schools and some feminist academics argue that women need to have academic success before they can take up roles in public domains and so influence laws, policies and the conditions of all women within society. According to the position, single sex schools may give girls the edge in academic success

because lessons can be designed to tap into girls' interests and so motivate them specifically in subjects that have masculine connotations such as the sciences. There is very little research on the long term social consequences of single sex schooling. Some advocates of girls' schools argued that single sex schools can be spaces where girls can begin to challenge male dominance and power, where girls can learn that they do not have to take second place to boys, that they can walk free from harassment and taunts and that they can achieve at par with men. Family formation is an important area that have been neglected by researchers. Family formation is often central to the argument used by both sides in the single sex debate. In particular, religious adherents of single sex schooling whether Catholic, Muslim or from other traditions are often concerned with (female) purity, and linked the danger of promiscuity and teenage pregnancy to co-educational schooling. Feminists have also been troubled by the existence of sexual harassment within co-educational schools.

Conversely, proponents of co-educational schooling have hinted that single sex schooling promotes homosexuality, though this is linked particularly to the elite boarding schools (Lambart and Millhan1968).

Yet review of studies of single sex and co-educational schooling have not found studies addressing the issue of teenage pregnancy or child bearing at any age, sexuality partnerships and marriage (Mael 1998). Feminists have also argued that girls in single sex schools are exposed to more women in positions of leadership which may affect their attitudes to gender roles. Yet according to Riordan (1990), 'we are not aware of any studies which examined adult attitudes to gender roles or the quality of relationships within the sexes, although one past study in the United States examined the incidence of divorce and found no difference in the likelihood of remaining married to the first spouse to either men or women according to

whether they attended single sex high school'. According to a survey conducted by Dale (1974), advocates of single sex schooling argued that co-educational schooling encourages early sexual activities. This suggested the hypothesis that the risk of teenage child bearing should be lower at single sex schools. In terms of gender role attitudes and behavior, advocates of single sex schooling argued that it gives girls moral confidence in their equality with men.

Arguments in Favour of Co-educational Schools

In terms of healthy relationships, Dale (1974) argued that mixed schooling was more natural and provided protection against homosexuality. He presented evidence suggesting that boys and girls in mixed schools had more positive and friendly attitudes towards one another and that as adults they were more likely to believe in the equality of the sexes and to have happier marriages than graduates of single sex schools. Atherton (1973) also suggested that men and women who had attended co-educational school had happier marriages. Sullivan (2011) suggested that attitudes to gender equality may be affected by single sex schooling. This can be argued in either way. Co-educational schooling may lead to more egalitarian relationship as argued by Dale (1974).

Alternatively, boys may assert their dominance in co-educational settings, perhaps with lasting consequences over the confidence of the girls. In terms of Psycho-social adjustment, advocates of co-educational schooling suggest that single sex schooling can cause psychological damage, which suggests that behavior problems such as aggression, malice, depression and isolation may be worse at single- sex schools. Many theorists support the view that co-educational schooling facilitates relationships between the sexes. In the same vein proponents of single sex schooling admits that it is difficult for people from single sex schools to form relationships with the opposite sex. This suggests the hypothesis that marriage

may be less likely for people who attended single sex schools. Following from the hypothesis above, one can hypothesize that graduates of single sex schools should be more likely to divorce. However these are assumptions that have no empirical backing.

Sullivan, Joshi and Leonard (2010) observed that in strongly gender-segregated societies, for example, with recognizable different social roles for men and women, attending single-sex schools reinforces the segregated gender roles in society. This sets up a dilemma for feminist educationists and raises the wider questions about the purposes of education. Should education maintain the social status quo or change it? According to Sullivan et al (2010), throughout the history of gender and education, schools have been viewed as important places for social change and places to foster the development of more equal societies with less oppressive social conditions for women. Therefore, the argument is that schools should be places that model equality and so provide young people with early experiences and knowledge of gender equality otherwise they will reproduce the unequal gender patterns that they encounter outside school in their later lives. According to this position co-educational schooling may be seen as a route towards greater gender equality. However, given that in most societies, gender inequalities are structural, teachers need to have enough experiences and knowledge of gender equality, otherwise they will reproduce the unequal gender patterns that they encounter outside school in their later lives. Co-educational schooling may be seen as a route towards greater gender equality. Teachers need to have enough gender awareness to prevent gender inequalities being reproduced through their pedagogic practice. Hence, the continuing need for all teachers to develop gender awareness.

Advocates of co-education argue that mixed schools are essential so that girls and boys can learn and work together. In general, their argument is that schools should

reflect real life (presumably out- of school life and as society is mixed, schools should also be mixed.

Conclusion

The little empirical evidence regarding the long term social consequences of single- sex and mixed schooling reveals no consistent differences in the personal development of boys and girls in these school types. Evidence suggest, for example, that there are no significant differences between students who attend single sex school and students who attend co-educational schools in terms of how easy or difficult they find it to adjust to university life and future family life overall though this is yet another area where there are more unanswered questions.

Recommendations

On the basis of the arguments regarding the social implications of single sex and co-educational schooling on future family life, the following suggestions are made:

1. Parents and guardians should weigh the advantages and disadvantages of the two school types and decide accordingly within the context of their cultural background, social status and religious faith.
2. The school social climate should also be put into consideration with respect to discipline and administrative efficiency.
3. Also school type whether public or private, faith based or secular should also be borne in mind.

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