

“Separate but Equal: What do you think?”

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Introduction:

In the beginning, God created “girl” brains and “boy” brains. Both know when to feed a hungry tummy or call it lights out after a long day on the playground, but can they properly function together in the same classroom? Today the debate of single-sex education has been a hot topic for schools nationwide. As of 2002, only 11 public schools in the United States offered same-sex education. That very year Congress passed the No Child Left Behind Act, a measure of education reform, and by 2009 over 550 schools, not including private institutions, were “genderized”. (Ellison, 2010) Though the numbers are seemingly small, single-sex education is a rising trend many parents and educators are leaning towards for today’s youth.

“Girl” brains and “boy” brains not only differ in size, but carry out different mental processes that affect behavior, maturation, and overall growth. The newest advances in brain imaging reveal a 25% larger area in girls that connect the left and right hemispheres. (Mulvey, 2010: 75) This latest finding correlates with the strength girls have to remember details, make connections, and pay attention at an earlier age.

Through the implementation of single-sex classrooms, school systems hope to better help students reach their full potential by meeting children’s needs based on gender development. Across the country, statistics show an increasing gender gap of female superiority throughout the basic schooling years; in early childhood, test scores are higher in girls and by late adolescence college attendance is majority women; a 2006 measure by the U.S Census Bureau estimated 56% female enrollment in colleges and universities as opposed to that of male enrollment, trailing at an estimated 44%. (Mulvey, 2010: 75) Having experienced both co-ed and segregated classrooms, I wish to weigh the benefits and drawbacks of attending an all-girls school.

Research:*For: Classroom Climate*

Since the 1990s, single-sex classrooms have been on an upward climb because of the academic and social benefits found by researchers. (Anfara and Mertens, 2008: 40) Because “boy” brains and “girl” brains are hard-wired to learn in unique ways, school climate is a major factor single-sex classrooms are able to accommodate in respect to gender. Boy students digest knowledge through an active teaching style. A competitive, physically active, and loud setting engages boys in the classroom by encouraging their natural tendency to be direct and enthusiastic. Girls, however, are most comfortable in quiet atmospheres. They tend to focus on details and quality, working well with their female peers and collaboratively on projects. (Kirschenbaum, 2007: 25) In Alabama, two single-sex fourth grades adjust school climate, literally. In the boy’s classroom, temperature is set to 69 degrees and classroom walls are painted blue in essence of a white light. In contrast, the girl’s classroom down the hall is heated to 75 degrees and painted yellow that radiates a warm glow in light of a yellow bulb. (Weil, 2008) By creating a suitable environment, students enjoy a pleasant atmosphere and teachers reap the benefits of a functioning classroom.

For: Equal Readiness

Separating boys and girls not only creates a suitable classroom climate, but forms a place of equal readiness. The simple fact that girls mature faster than boys plays a significant role in the classroom. Girls enter school with superior verbal and fine-motor skills, longer attention spans, and greater impulse control. (Mulvey, 2010: 75) Boys, typically two years behind girls, have not yet acquired these basic skills or mental maturity that their female peers possess. Thus, in co-ed classrooms, boys are always being compared to higher-achieving girls. Grouping boys together puts them on an even-level playing field where success rates are much higher and consequently, so is their desire to learn.

By placing boys and girls in individual classrooms, equality as a whole is served to the students. In a conducted study, data was gathered from 86 secondary classrooms -- co-ed and single-sex -- among 21 U.S. schools on the basis of sexism. (Lee, Marks, and Byrd 2010: 67) In the mixed classroom, two forms of sexism were prevalent against girls: gender domination and active discrimination. Instead of boys being undermined, girls were overlooked in discussion by the assertive temperament of their male peers, causing boys to receive more attention by the teacher. This was especially common in chemistry and other physical sciences, where boys are typically more confident. (Kirschenbaum, 2007: 25) Through single-sex classrooms, boys and girls are not only acknowledged equally, but encouraged to pursue fields outside their gender stereotypes. It's argued that girls, who are outnumbered four-to-one nationwide in the sciences, are unintentionally steered away from such courses and boys too pushed out of the arts and languages. (Rycik, 2008: 36) It is by separating genders that sexism in the classroom is reduced and socially-accepted stereotypes are broken.

For: Academic Turnouts

Social settings of single-sex classrooms benefit an individual's psychological state, which is reflected in higher tests scores and attendance rates. An experimental pilot program in Florida was performed on two mixed classes and two gender-specific classes. Given a standardized state exam, the boys-only class scored 85% compared to the co-ed class, whose score was 37%. Similarly, the girls-only class climbed to 75% from the co-ed average of 59%. (Ellison, 2010) Woodbridge Middle School found the same improvement since they initiated single-sex classes in 2007; a survey taken three months into the year showed a higher attendance and a considerable decline in gender gap. Seeing such marvelous outcomes, Principal Calhoun stated, 'There is much more to it than simply putting girls in one room and boys in another'. (Buske, 2010)

Against: Unconstitutional

Though more are growing fond of the single-sex classroom, many are fixed on keeping schools a diverse body of boys and girls. The most popular argument is grounded in the United States Constitution. Tied to racial segregation, “genderized” classrooms are held as a violation to Title IX of the Equal Protection Clause. In 2006, the Department of Education amended this regulation to allow more leeway for single-sex programs. (Stotsky, Denny, and Tschepikow, 2008) In Louisiana, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) used Title IX to appeal a school’s decision that gave Rost A. Middle School the permission to establish single-sex classrooms. Though the lawsuit, which was filed in 2009 on behalf of an outraged parent, was granted a revised version of the program, positive findings from the school board supported the middle school in keeping the single-sex classes. (Herbert, 2010) Seen as unconstitutional, feminists and civil right’s advocates argue gender segregation form stereotypes detrimental to youth, especially girls. (Rycik, 2008: 36) A voice of the National Women’s Law Center claims single-sex education to be ‘an invitation to discrimination’. (Anfara and Mertens, 2008: 40)

Against: Co-ed Classroom for a Co-ed World

Critics also believe “genderized” classrooms to be poor preparation for a co-educational world. Many see the real world as an integrated place where jobs, power, and influence is a contentious battle between men and women; part of being a member of society is engaging in activities with the opposite sex, whether that be in the workplace or at home with the family. (Rycik, 2008: 36) It is argued that to be a healthy adult, children need to interact and socialize with both boys and girls in order to appreciate and respect gender differences in themselves and others. Without a co-ed environment, classrooms lack the different perspectives, questions, and interests that contribute to the excitement of learning. (Boyd, 2007: 25)

Conclusion:

The debate of single-sex schools is a growing topic of the 21st century. As more schools are finding positive results in separating girls and boys, what once was considered a thing of the past is now a trend more people are starting to embrace.

The question I want to answer using my own personal experience and the research I found is “how does single-sex education affect the learning culture of girls and boys?”. It happens that my answers lies in yet another question, “Is it more important to be academically prepared or socially equipped?” Both are important yet both predominately lie in separate classrooms. At my co-ed junior high, social recognition mattered to the average student. During class discussion, voluntarily participation was almost always seen in a selected few; others acted like they didn’t care or were too scared to respond for fear of rejection. Peer approval was equivalent to getting an A in Mrs. Wilk’s geometry class. To have friends and feel a sense of belonging within a blended society was valuable to the typical student. Overall, social interaction between genders was a daily practice in and outside of the classroom.

Transitioning from a co-ed classroom in middle school to a single-sex classroom in high school was a major change. The same-sex classroom focused on intellect rather than popularity. “Nerds” and “tomboys” made up student council and the student body was a strong community of girls. There was little pressure to fit in and comply to social standards, which many adolescence are subject to. Ultimately, social interaction mattered much less when compared to one’s academic future.

Though it seems my answer lies in single-sex schooling, I feel that I missed out on a lot of memories my prior middle school friends claim to be unforgettable. I missed having boys in the classroom to make sarcastic remarks and, as my study shows, add to “the excitement of

learning” that only a mixed class of boys and girls can create. Classroom climate was fitting and equal readiness gave more opportunity to individuals, but grades were overemphasized, which put a lot of stress on the students. Thus, after considering both sides, I was left with a final question, “How do we as a uniform body of educated learners bring these two ends of the spectrum together?” I don’t have the answer and I don’t know if there will ever be one, but what I do believe is that both learning cultures are equally important to students and the best decision depends on the goals of an individual and what type of person he or she is.

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