

## SINGLE-SEX EDUCATION IN THE XXI CENTURY

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### SUMMARY:

After centuries of segregation of the sexes in schools, followed by decades of mixed classes, single-sex education is presented as a modern treatment of the gender question, with proved outcomes and naturally in-tune with the trend toward individualized education. Such education grows in strength through the separation of the sexes, given that one thus eliminates gender pressures that are anti-academic and outside the scope of schooling, thus facilitating the personal development of each student.

*The objective of teaching is to prune, through imposition, the latent freedom of the neophyte in order that he or she may come to full flower.*

Fernando Savater

In April 2007, EASSE organized in Barcelona the First International Congress of Same-Sex Education. Subsequent events were held in Rome and in Warsaw. And now we are here in Portugal for the fourth such meeting.

The question that all of us ask is the following: why is it, just at this particular time in history, that a movement of this kind has appeared? After all, isn't the separation of the sexes a thing of the past? Isn't it a barrier that has been overcome? Could it be that the separation of the sexes within schools is really important? I intend to respond to these questions in what follows.

### SAME-SEX SCHOOLS: AN EMERGING MODALITY

The theme of the congress did not come about by chance; problems related to gender in education have been treated with insistence during the last decades<sup>1</sup>. Currently there is the debate over same-sex education, presented as modern educational practice.

For centuries, education discriminated against girls and reproduced gender stereotypes. Some decades ago, co-education was seen as a move toward equality. The inclusion of girls in the same classes as boys – together with the obligatory nature of education – appeared to insure equality of opportunities through the use of a uniform curriculum and identical educational quality. There is no doubt that thanks to education policy, this was a step forward toward equality for women.

But today, years later, we can see that, in spite of everything, gender “integration” in schools is not a definitive solution for inequalities that stubbornly persist.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Perhaps the awakening of interest may be placed in the year 1982, when Carol Gilligan published *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*, which rapidly became a best-seller, and has been translated into 9 languages.

<sup>2</sup> «The sexist stereotypes, persistently used for such a long time, would not automatically disappear merely by placing boys and girls in the same classroom and having them receive the same content. On the contrary; without denying the advance that this change portends, coeducational schools reproduced the same stereotypes behind much more subtle forms of discrimination.» *Dolors Vallejo contributed many years of experience to coeducation in Catalunya (1989-1999). Research on equal opportunities of boys and girls*, 1999.

In the face of this new discovery, recognized by education professionals and proven by education statistics, new proposals for change appear. These we may summarize, grouping them into two broad trends:

- A. First, there are the trends that see gender “integration” “as a victory not to be given up, and as such, a value linked to democracy and equality. Perception of the difficulties lead the proposals adopting this perspective to argue for the retention of both genders in the classroom and propose as a solution to the problems cited of so-called “coeducation”.<sup>3</sup> This would suppose recognizing a “hidden curriculum” that maintains sexist stereotypes, and with them, the subordination of women and of actions aimed at eliminating this educational distortion.
- B. Second, another trend argues that the separation of boys and girls in school, maintaining an identical curriculum and identical educational infrastructure represents progress for aspects such as the creation of a pro-academic and respectful school climate, the elimination of gender stereotypes and attention to the specific characteristics of each gender. This, in fact, could be the very definition of a same-sex school that constitutes, in my opinion, the most recent contribution to the gender perspective in school organization and practices, and that should not be confused with the segregated education that was dominant until the XX century.

Often, in the face of these two organizational possibilities, the question is asked in regard to which is the most efficient.

First, I would underline the need to avoid simplifications. I refer to the fact that education research is among the most complex fields of study. Any education scenario carries with it an unlimited number of variables, many of which are dif-

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<sup>3</sup> In the United States, the term used is “curricular transformation”.

ficult to quantify. In this sense, I believe that, without being very specific as to the meaning and circumstances under which such a statement is made, no one is able to say that one of the models presented is better than the other.

My considerations do not pretend to represent more than a line of thinking toward a better understanding of same-sex education within an individualized model. As Ms. Lerner, a teacher in a boy's school said, surprised, "I'm not sure what is more important: the absence of the other sex or the gender of the students."<sup>4</sup> In this sense, the words of Altarejos are of great interest: "the goodness and efficacy of same-sex education cannot be demonstrated; it can only be shown argumentatively"<sup>5</sup>.

Furthermore, we cannot underestimate the recent meta-analyses that have taken place, and that seek to bring together all of the existing research on this subject. This synthesis was meticulously analyzed by Riordan<sup>6</sup>, who compared -outcomes between coeducational and same-sex schools for each of the variables analyzed in the research: the same-sex schools showed greater efficacy, small but significant, on several variables. On others the outcomes were equal. On none of the variables studied did coeducational schools significantly outperform same-sex schools.

As will be understood from all that has been said here, for practical effects, this doesn't mean that a coeducational school can have a very low level of education. In any case, the same-sex school model presents itself as a innovative form of organization that came upon the scene during the beginning of

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<sup>4</sup> Nancy Lerner, *Women teaching boys: the confessions of Nancy Lerner*, University School Press, Ohio, 1995, p. 6.

<sup>5</sup> Francisco Altarejos em: Enric Vidal (coord.), *Diferentes, iguales, juntos? Educación diferenciada*, Ariel, Barcelona, 2006, p. 228.

<sup>6</sup> Cornelius Riordan, *The Effects of Single-Sex Schools*, in: III *Latin-American Congress of Same-Sex Education: New scenarios for the education of boys and girls*. Buenos Aires: ALCED Argentina, 2009.

the XXI century and that offers a facilitating approach in some important areas of education research.

## INDIVIDUALIZED EDUCATION

However, before beginning to expound upon the potential benefits of same-sex education, it would appear useful to speak briefly of so-called “individualized education”. In many countries there is indeed a link between same-sex education and acceptance of this pedagogical trend. But in the presentations of these schools (in their educational programs and on their web sites) we do not usually find a connection between individualization and separation of the sexes. In fact, in the reference work on individualized education<sup>7</sup> few considerations appear in regard to gender. From a simplistic point of view, there would even seem to be a contradiction: if one achieves individualization, what need is there to separate the sexes? If one wishes to respect a person in terms of his or her singularity, why do many of these schools require that their students wear a uniform?

In what follows I will attempt to explore these connections. I believe that this is something worth investigating, given that schools that adopt individualized and same-sex education are producing impressive results at all levels, although perhaps without knowing for certain the reason for their success.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Victor García Hoz, *La educación personalizada*, Miñón, Valladolid, 1997.

<sup>8</sup> “No one in the world knows with a reasonable degree of certainty, either empirical, theoretical, or philosophical, if the choices of single-sex education are more or less effective; or in what subjects or in what area of personal development they can be more or less effective. No one knows if they would or would not be more effective for certain types of students, such as those at-risk, whether female or male. Due in great part to political opposition, research on single-sex schools is still in its infancy. Better days are yet to come. (...) We need to provide some foundation so that a sufficient number of single-sex public schools can be opened in order that, at least for a reasonable period of time, we can obtain answers to questions that I have presented above.” Cornelius Riordan, *The Effects of Single*

In this sense, what I am going to say should be seen as an attempt to bring us closer to education and to suggest research paths and education practices in order to improve individualized teaching.

As we know, education has two sides:

- A. First, it is a process of assimilation on the part of students (assimilation of adult culture, incorporation into the adult world, to be similar to the teacher ...)
- B. Second, it is a process of “individual separation” of each student (to make effective one’s own possibilities, to decide, to make use of freedom, to seek one’s own identity...)<sup>9</sup>

Individualized education consists in the attempt to stimulate the student to direct his or her own life; to develop the ability to make effective personal freedom, participating with his or her particular characteristics, in community life. It is based on the supposition that within a group of the same age there will be a notable variety, and on the need to pay attention to

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*Sex Schools: What Do We Know?* Note at the I International Congress of Single-sex Education (EASSE), Barcelona, April, 2007. Dr. Riordan is Professor of Education at Providence College, and has dedicated a great part of his life to the study of single-sex education. An appropriate ending of the above quote demands a close reading of the entire document.

<sup>9</sup> Abbagnano, summarizing the thought of Dewey, says: “The educational process has two aspects: one that is psychological and involves the interiorization and amplification of individual potential; and another that is social and consists of preparing and adapting the individual for the tasks that he or she will carry out in society. Frequently, these two aspects are in serious opposition, but this opposition is lessened and can disappear if in the process we remember that the potentialities of the developing individual lack meaning outside the social environment, and that on the other hand, the only possible “adaptation” is, under current circumstances, that which is produced when the individual takes full possession of all of his or her faculties. (...) With the advent of democracy and modern industrial conditions, writes Dewey, it becomes impossible to predict with precision what civilization will be like in twenty years. Consequently, it is impossible to prepare children to confront specific conditions. Preparing them for the future means making them owners of themselves. It means educating them so they may rapidly acquire complete control over all of their capacities.” N. Abbagnano, A. Visalberghi, *História da Pedagogia*, Fondo de Cultura Económica, México, 1964, p. 641.

these differences. It is also part of an approach that sees the child as a person; as a being who explores and modifies the environment of which he or she is a part, and not merely as an organism that reacts to stimuli. Individualization seeks to set each person apart from the whole, so that he or she is no longer one among many”.

Thus, personal characteristics include:

- A. Singularity. Each girl or boy is different from the others, with her or his own possibilities and limitations, self-knowledge, originality ... In this sense, “the cultivation of creativity is the singular and most specific activity of the child and the most complete activity of individualized education”.<sup>10</sup>
- B. Autonomy. We are dealing with free beings who are self-determining. Their acts, therefore, carry with them personal responsibility and the capacity to modify the environment within which they act through their own ideas and potential.
- C. Openness. Human beings have the need and capacity for communication with others, with the society around them. In fact, every human relation is one of communication. All communications require expression and understanding on the part of the communicator. In this sense, living together is enriched with personal development, since through development the person will have more to communicate and be able to express better. Consideration of others as persons facilitates understanding and, in the end, facilitates living together.

As can be readily seen, an essential element in all of this is the respect for freedom, and as a consequence, this leads to a pedagogy that facilitates the possibilities of choice of students.

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<sup>10</sup> Víctor García Hoz, *Educación personalizada*, Valladolid, Ed. Miñon, 1977, p. 25.

These possibilities increase with the ability for reflection, the acceptance of responsibility, the will to undertake difficult tasks, creativity, and initiative. All of these characteristics are inherent to free choice. Individualized education believes, therefore, that freedom is the basis of all human activity.

It is well to also state what individualized education is not:

- A. It is not one that considers children as subject to “training”, in the sense of “programming” or conditioning the child toward correct behaviors through stimulus-response.
- B. It does not see the individual as so immersed in a social torrent replete with pressures that there are no truly personal decisions, nor possibilities to influence the surrounding environment.
- C. With very few exceptions, students are not beings so marked by biology that they cannot extract themselves from their backgrounds.

Moreover: acceptance of any of the above leads to the depersonalization the student, contributing to his or her “vulnerability” as a human being and badly serving both the person and society. One recognizes that social and biological pressures exist – it would make no sense to oppose them in schools – but I refer to the possibility of the person lessening them.<sup>11</sup> Individualized education can, in this sense, carry out an important task.

Once again quoting García Hoz: the most profound reason for individualized education comes from the consideration of the human being as a person, with his or her character as an active subject facing a world of objective realities, in relation to which the person occupies a higher level of dignity

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<sup>11</sup> It seems to me appropriate to mention here the first pages of the book: Steven Pinker, *The Blank Slate*, The Penguin Group, New York, 2002.



and whose life is fully human and authentic, but only through the exercise of freedom”.<sup>12</sup>

## CONCEPT OF THE SCHOOL

If we now focus our attention on the question of gender, we can enter more deeply into the meaning that what we say has for the education of people, both men and women. It is a question of seeking teaching practices that strengthen the dimensions of a free person.

We spoke earlier of social and cultural pressures on the one hand, and biological and innate factors on the other. Individualized education should make it possible for these two forces not to impede the development of our students.

First of all, we should consider that a student in the obligatory years of schooling is prepared neither for life nor even for adolescence.<sup>13</sup> Rather, it is the education that he or she receives that has the responsibility locating the person within society, granting the skills that the person will need in order to develop as a person and as a citizen. In this sense, schools cannot be seen as reflections of society or as societies in miniature. Education is aimed at improving society, and not to be a reflection of it. They should, therefore, avoid reproducing the inequalities, the violence, etc., of the streets. If it were not thus, schools would soon become emergency rooms for problems of the neighborhood, city, and country. Rather, they should be “artificial” environments that generate opportunities that would otherwise be impossible. This requires the creation of a specifically school type of environment, distant from the values of youth culture that, especially in adolescence, are fre-

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<sup>12</sup> Víctor García Hoz, *La educación personalizada*, p. 36.

<sup>13</sup> In regard to this stage, it is worthwhile recalling the point of view (to which I subscribe) of Patrice Huerre, “L’histoire de l’adolescence: rôles et fonctions d’un artifice”, *Journal Français de Psychiatrie*, núm. 14, 2001, 3.

quently at odds with academic values. Salamone, citing Coleman, states that “juvenile culture” in secondary schools exercises a negative influence on academic and intellectual objectives. Coeducational schools contribute to a system of adolescent values that give priority to popularity rather than to academic development. School “integration” facilitates popularity based on physical attractiveness in the case of girls, and on skills in sports in the case of the boys.<sup>14</sup> Without doubt, the models and referents that the students adopt are frequently in agreement with these kinds of values.

Second, schools cannot be ivory towers that hide from students the problems that they will have to face, or that they already face in society. The artificiality mentioned here means the creation of conditions that make it possible for students to exercise their freedom without the pressures that we as adults are able to face, thanks to maturity in the exercise of freedom and possession of a critical spirit.

Many authors<sup>15</sup> are currently proposing a new kind of school the specifically includes this distancing from ordinary circumstances in order to produce a protected environment that makes it possible to explore terrain unthinkable in other venues; that makes very clear the difference between areas of leisure and areas of work, etc. Single-sex education finds itself precisely in this will to create environments free from pressures that students habitually confront outside of school and that impede their education and their personal development.

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<sup>14</sup> Rosemary Salomone, *Same, Different, Equal. Rethinking Single-Sex Schooling*, Yale University Press, 2003, p. 198-199. Recently, numerous works have called attention to infant and adolescent “culture” – its creation and problems. Among those of special mention are: John R. Gillis, *Youth and History. Tradition and Change in European Age Relations, 1770-Present*, Academic Press, New York, 1981, Patrice Huerre, “L’histoire de l’adolescence: rôles et fonctions d’un artifice”, *Journal Français de Psychiatrie*, núm. 14, 2001,3; Adolfo Perinat (coord.), *Los adolescentes en el siglo XXI. Un enfoque psicosocial*, Editorial UOC, Barcelona, 2003.

<sup>15</sup> Particularly important due, to the ideas and the profundity with which they are presented, is the recent work of de Gregoitrío Luri, *Per una educació republicana; escola i valors*, Barcelona, Ed. Barcino, 2012.

## SINGLE-SEX EDUCATION AS A SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT WITHIN THE SCHOOL

In the above-cited treatise on individualized education by García Hoz, there is a sentence that I consider to be essential: “The multiple possibilities of relations between students condition learning situations, in that learning takes place through communication. The way of being of students constitutes the principal factor in school learning situations. And since the way of being depends primarily on social factors, learning situations are conditioned, above all, by the way that students are grouped”.<sup>16</sup>

In my opinion, this statement illuminates one of the most enriching areas of single-sex education: the analysis of in-school gender relations through the use of social psychology. As this known, this discipline studies the psychology of groups in their creation, norms, development, the socialization of their members, identities, intra and inter-group relations, stereotypes, and prejudices. It thus offers us various clues to understanding of some reasons for the success of school grouping by sex.

First, it is important to consider the fact of the tendency in children – beginning at approximately four years of age – to prefer interacting with members of their own sex. This tendency increases with age and that emerges as a “robust” and universal phenomenon.<sup>17</sup> This tendency persists, even after

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<sup>16</sup> Víctor García Hoz, *La educación personalizada*, p. 96.

<sup>17</sup> “There is a substantial degree of sex segregation among children of pre-school age, and this tendency can be seen in diverse cultural environments. The anthropologists Whiting and Edwards (1988) presented observations of small societies in very dispersed locations (including villages or suburbs in Africa, India, the Philippines, Mexico, and the United States). They are of the opinion that, in these cultures, children of 4-5 years of age play most of the time with other children of their own age. In the cases only considering the interactions with children who were not siblings, the playmates chosen during the ages of 3 and 6 were of the same sex approximately two-thirds of the time. From six to ten years of age, this rate of same sex playmates increased to three-quarters of the time.”. *Eleanor Maccoby, the Two Sexes. Growing up Apart, Coming Together*, Harvard University Press, 2003, p. 21.

activities and programs designed to diminish it. Moreover, there are studies that show that this “forced” *integration* carried out by educators contributes toward increasing in boys and girls prejudices toward the opposite sex, and which manifest themselves least strongly at the beginning of academic studies, after a vacation period.<sup>18</sup> For example, there is an obvious self-segregation of the within schools in which students have the freedom to interact with whom they feel most at ease. It is not the case, therefore, of fighting against a universal tendency that is in itself engrained in boys and girls. Nor can one generalize the ideological interpretation that asserts that this segregation is merely a question of culture learned from its opposite: that segregation occurs entirely due to natural differences of birth.

On the other hand, we also know that school organization always presupposes a certain artificiality in the ‘way of being grouped’. Particularly patent is the rigidly determined segregation of students by age (except in case of grade repetition), as is single-sex schooling as well. In any case, any school will have an obligatory concentration of the child population, ruled by norms that we rarely find in other environments.<sup>19</sup> To me, of particular relevance is understanding groups that are created within this environment and that perhaps will begin to awaken greater interest when they manifest lamentable cases bullying.

Before beginning the next section, we will direct ourselves to the question of the importance of having mixed or single-sex classes. The fact that gender is a key element in the manifestation of many attitudes and social behaviors in schools is unquestionable. Maccoby<sup>20</sup> recognized that, in spite of the dominance of gender mixture in schools, the lines of sepa-

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<sup>18</sup> Eleanor Maccoby, *The Two Sexes. Growing up Apart, Coming Together*, Harvard University Press, 2003, p. 24.

<sup>19</sup> Michael Thompson e Teresa Barrer, *The pressured Child: Helping Your Child Find Success in School and Life*, Random House, Toronto, 2004.

<sup>20</sup> Eleanor E. Maccoby, *The Two Sexes. Growing up Apart, Coming Together*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003.

ration between the sexes are stronger than the lines of race. Harris<sup>21</sup> writes that, during infancy, the most important group categorization is that of gender. Similarly, Páez<sup>22</sup>, when enumerating the most important categories in social perceptions sites sex in first place, and states that “the gender categories are more important than other social categories”. Some authors such as Grant<sup>23</sup> note how the socialization experiences of children in classes vary, above all in terms of race and sex. Baron and Byrnesay<sup>24</sup> note the same from the perspective of identity. Fagot and Leinbach<sup>25</sup> recognize gender as the principal parameter of social categorization of boys and girls.

#### PSYCHOSOCIAL EFFECTS OF GENDER IN SCHOOL ENVIRONMENTS

One of the concepts of social psychology that is of most interest to education is so-called “Code Switching”. This expression refers to socialization within specific contexts, and has as a key characteristic the fact that human behaviors frequently adapt themselves to each concrete environment. Teachers are well aware of the difficulty experienced by the children of foreign born parents to speak in their native language to the teacher, even when the teacher knows the native language. At the same time, these students have difficulty expressing themselves at home in the language of the school.<sup>26</sup> This is a sim-

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<sup>21</sup> Judith R. Harris, *Where is the Child's Environment? A Group Socialization Theory of Development*, *Psychological Review*, 102(3), 1995, p. 458-489.

<sup>22</sup> Darío Páez, et al. (coord.), *Psicología social, cultura y educación*, Madrid: Pearson Educación, 2004, p. 208.

<sup>23</sup> Robert A. Baron e Donn Byrne, *Psicología social*. Madrid: Prentice Hall, 1998.

<sup>24</sup> Beverly I. Fagot e Mary D. Leinbach, *Gender-Role Development in Young Children: From Discrimination to Labeling*. *Developmental Review*, 13 (2), 1993, p. 205-224.

<sup>25</sup> Judith R. Harris, *The Nurture Assumption*, The Free Press, New York, 1998, p. 63.

<sup>26</sup> “Com efeito, os homens e as mulheres diferem. E fazem-no em âmbitos e estilos que se encontram relacionados tanto com a natureza como com a educação. Diferenças que todos deveríamos saber valorizar e respeitar”. David C. Geary, *La*

plified example of how Code Switching works. Similarly, boys and girls adopt specific codes for the school that involve concrete behaviors and values that are greatly determined by the existing school social environment. As Rich Harris has emphasized, this is not a new phenomenon.<sup>27</sup>

It is important that we ask ourselves how schools can organize this environment so that boys and girls can enjoy this freedom of which we have spoken, and with equal opportunities. A common problem that one encounters in coeducational schools is the appearance of one “culture” for boys and of another for girls. Both sexes tend to adopt implicit roles and norms that identify them as members of their gender group, creating styles of behavior that are far from academic and loaded with the baggage of sexist stereotypes that they bring with them from outside the school.

There is no doubt that differentiating psycho-biological aspects between boys and girls are at the basis of these attitudes.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, it is worthwhile asking the question “to what extent can the absence of the other sex facilitate in boys the most frequent virtues of girls: cooperation, empathy, dialogue, a pro-academic attitude, the disappearance of group norms that lead to sexism .. and on the other hand, how can we encourage in girls participation in classes and leadership, the option for typically masculine professions,<sup>29</sup> the lessening of stereotypes of their own image<sup>30</sup>, the elimination of fear and

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*Vanguardia*, 20 de junho de 2004. Geary é catedrático de psicologia na Universidade de Missouri-Columbia.

<sup>27</sup> Num estudo recente, Cussó propõe aulas separadas por sexo como prática favorecedora do acesso das raparigas às carreiras técnicas: Roser Cussó, *Tecnologia: gènere i professió*, Llicències d’estudis retribuïdes, curs 2005-2006, *Butlletí La Recerca*, Universitat de Barcelona, Institut de Ciències de l’Educació, Núm. 8, junho de 2007.

<sup>28</sup> American Psychological Association, “Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls”, Washington, 2007.

<sup>29</sup> Veja-se, por exemplo: Alexandra Frean, “Why a fear of failure hits brightest girls the hardest”, *The Times*, 10 de março de 2008.

<sup>30</sup> John C. Turner, *Rediscovering the Social Group. A Self-Categorization Theory*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1987, p. 142 e ss.

personal intolerance of school failure, the non-dependence on praise for their own self-esteem ....<sup>31</sup> The self-categorization of boys and girls within groups of their own sex undoubtedly acts strongly on what is considered as “correct” for each group. Social psychology uses the expression “Group Polarization”<sup>32</sup> in which “the mere perception of belonging to two distinct groups is sufficient to unleash inter-group discrimination in favor of the endogroup. In other words, the simple fact of recognizing the presence of an exogroup is sufficient to provoke competitive or discriminatory inter-group responses on the part of the endogroup”<sup>33</sup>.

In this sense, it is important to pay attention to the experiences and testimonies of teachers.<sup>34</sup> Single-sex education shows itself to be effective for personal freedom in terms of the acceptance of roles considered to be characteristic of the other sex, of personal freedom in the exploration of new scenarios. Suffice it to imagine the preparation of a

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<sup>31</sup> Henri Tajfel e John C. Turner, em J. F. Morales e C. Huici (eds), *Lecturas de Psicología Social*, UNED, Madrid, 1989, p. 235, p. 85, citado por Francisco Gil, *Introducción a la psicología de los grupos*, Pirámide, Madrid, 2007, p. 85.

<sup>32</sup> For example, Margrét Pála Ólafsdóttir – a teacher from Iceland – introduced single-sex pre-school education in 1989. Currently, there are various single-sex preschools in Ireland, and the model has begun to be applied in other Nordic countries. Ólafsdóttir states: “Both sexes seek to carry out tasks that they know. They select the behavior that they know and that they consider appropriate for the gender to which they belong. In coeducational schools, each gender monopolizes its stereotyped tasks and behaviors. For this reason, the gender that really needs to practice new things never has the opportunity to do so. Therefore, coeducational schools support and increase the old traditional roles.” Margrét Pála Ólafsdóttir, “Kids are both girls and boys in Iceland”, *Women’s Studies International Forum*, volume 19, Number 4, pp. 357-369, 1996.

<sup>33</sup> Enric Vidal, *Retos y perspectivas del tratamiento de género en la escuela*, Presentation at the 1st International Congress of Single-Sex Education (EASSE), Barcelona, April, 2007.

<sup>34</sup> “When the borders of gender are activated, the weak aggregation of ‘boys and girls’ consolidates itself into the group formation ‘The Boys’ and ‘The Girls’ as separate and more consistent groups. During this process, identity categories that on other occasions have minimal relevance for interaction become the basis of separate collectivities” Barrie Thorne, *Gender Play: Girls and Boys in School*, Rutgers, University Press, New Brunswick, NJ, 1993, p. 64.

theater piece in order to understand what this means. In a single-sex environment it is easier, for example, for any boy to prepare the costumes, to hang decorations on the stage, climbing a ladder to do so, with total freedom. In the presence of girls, the search for affirmation of sexual identity and self-affirmation within the group, social comparisons ... all contribute to the polarization of stereotypes. The same can be said in regard to girls.

According to Professor Vidal, “in a school of boys, when it is well administered, many ways of “being a boy” are permitted. In a school of girls, each student may express her femininity in a much broader fashion, without complexes. In single-sex schools, masculinity and femininity are much broader and contain many more subtleties, and they are much richer concepts”.<sup>35</sup>

In this sense, single-sex schools are based on a particular structure, certainly much distant from the everyday life of men and women in the street, but which offers greater facility for the creation of a pro-academic and pro-socializing school culture that, in my opinion, currently is not available. There is no doubt that education has an impact on the disappearance of sexist differences and attitudes. One should be aware of the limited possibilities presented to a teacher who is faced with the group dynamics that are in place between boys and girls, which result in rivalries, comparisons, and polarization of attitudes. It may be that we have underestimated the importance of peer pressure in the adoption of certain styles of behavior in order to maintain one’s membership within the group or to improve one’s status within the group. As we have said, from a young age these groups have a marked single-sex character that increases from grade to grade.

During the first years of life, boys and girls attentively record the various categories of persons: adults and children,

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<sup>35</sup> Eleanor Maccoby, *The Two Sexes. Growing up Apart, Coming Together*, Harvard University Press, 2003, p. 52.



women and men, boys and girls ... Socialization occurs in single-sex groups, creating diverse social structures for each. Barrie Thorne, in her well-known work, recognizes the activation of these structures and their power for increasing opposition and exaggeration of the differences between groups of boys and girls.<sup>36</sup>

The case of boys merits specific consideration. For them, masculinity is especially linked to non-femininity. This probably results in a greater difficulty in relieving oneself of gender pressures within the group, which may easily lead to less academic attitudes, due to considering these to be “less feminine”. Girls have more freedom of action. “Clearly, an essential element for being masculine is being non-feminine, while girls can be feminine without the need to demonstrate that they are not masculine”<sup>37</sup>

Thus, in a coeducational environment, we note the presence of two social categories that, substantially, are created based on “the other”. At the same time, a single-sex school perhaps has more possibilities to create a school culture with values and attitudes that are less dependent on the interaction between groups of boys and girls, and in this way allowing students to be more independent of these group processes that normalize the behaviors of boys and girls in coeducational institutions. As Rich Harris states, “what reduces the preeminence of gender categories is the total absence of interaction: the absence of the other sex. When only one group is present, group conditioners are weakened, and self-characterization moves from *us* to *I*.”<sup>38</sup>

It has been observed, for example, that without the presence of boys, girls adopt less “feminine” attitudes, improving

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<sup>36</sup> Judith Rich Harris, *The Nurture Assumption*, The Free Press, New York, 1998, p. 234.

<sup>37</sup> Claude M. Steele, A Threat in the Air. How Stereotypes Shapes Intellectual Identity and Performance. *American Psychologist*, 52 (6), 1997, p. 613-629.

<sup>38</sup> Eleanor Maccoby, *The Two Sexes. Growing up Apart, Coming Together*, Harvard University Press, 2003. p. 28.

their performance in sporting events. The emphasis goes from group stereotypes toward the possibilities of people in their individuality, creativity, freedom, and responsibility.

We find another example in the celebrated article of Claude Steele,<sup>39</sup> in which he analyzes the different outcomes of girls in math exams, in terms of pressures of gender and the environment on their lesser ability in this subject.

Probably, the creation, within a coeducational school of an environment in which other kinds of groups are established - for example groups of various ages - would decrease the importance of the division into two sexes. Naturally, this would create organizational and pedagogical problems that would be difficult to manage. Single-sex schools, in any case, adopts the gender perspective as a very important aspect of school organization - to the point of opting for the kind of organization that at times limits by one-half the potential "clients". One should note that we are referring to the school environment; in environments with a reduced number of girls and boys, as in a family or a neighborhood, there are fewer opportunities to form groups by sex, which leads in turn to greater and better interaction between boys and girls.<sup>40</sup>

The social psychology concept of group space<sup>41</sup> offers us an idea of what the constant presence of another sex within the same space means.

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<sup>39</sup> Veja-se, por exemplo, o magnífico capítulo de Gil em: Francisco Gil e Carlos María Alcover, *Introducción a la psicología de los grupos*, Ediciones Pirámide, Madrid, 2007, cap. 4.

<sup>40</sup> Veja-se, por exemplo: Xavier Bonal, *Las actitudes del profesorado ante la coeducación. Propuestas de intervención*, Graó, Col. "biblioteca d'aula", núm. 114, Barcelona, 1997; Myra Sadker e David Sadker, *Failing at Fairness*, Touchstone Books, New York, 1995; Cornelius Riordan, *Girls and boys in school. Together or separate?* Teachers College Press, Columbia University, 1990, p. 54.

<sup>41</sup> Eva Pomerantz, *et al.*, "Making the Grade but Feeling Distressed: Gender Differences in Academic Performance and Internal Distress", *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 94 (2), 2002, p. 402, citado por Leonard Sax, *Why Gender Matters*, Doubleday, New York, 2005.

## SINGLE-SEX SCHOOLS: GENDER STEREOTYPES AND OTHER ASPECTS

Up to this point, all of the gender pressures described have referred to students. But we should also ask about teachers, who are not beyond the reach of social, media, and education influences, etc. In Western countries, teachers are increasingly aware of the need to educate while taking the gender perspective into account. In spite of progress in terms of equality, there is still a concern in regard to certain inequalities that continue to be pertinent, even with coeducation that supposedly was able to reduce gender differences in schools. This gender bias in teaching practice has been described through the analysis of the behavior of teachers who, unconsciously, treat boys and girls differently.<sup>42</sup> Besides noting this bias, one should also recognize the peculiarities – statistically speaking – of each sex have a powerful influence in relation to the teacher and to the school as an institution. For example: “girls generalize the meaning of their mistakes, interpreting them as indicators that they have disappointed adults. Boys, in contrast, see their mistakes as relevant only in the specific field in which they occur. This is perhaps due to the small importance that boys give to the desire to please adults.”<sup>43</sup>

Another aspect to highlight is the gender of teachers, and in what way this can be a factor to be taken into account in individualized education. Teachers are more than suppliers of information; they are counselors who should facilitate students to “look toward their future adult world”<sup>44</sup> and thus facilitate their proper integration into society. For this reason, it is important to consider as well the facility that women and men

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<sup>42</sup> José María Barrio, “La coeducación. Un acercamiento desde la antropología pedagógica”, *Persona y Derecho*, Núm. 50, 2004, p. 349.

<sup>43</sup> Michelle Stanworth, *Gender and Schooling*, Hutchinson, 1981, cited by Sue Askew and Carol Ross, *Los chicos no lloran. El sexismo en educación*, Paidós, 1991, p. 66.

<sup>44</sup> Thomas S. Dee, “The Why Chromosome. How a teacher’s gender affects boys and girls”, *Education Next*, Fall 2006, p. 68-75.

may have in preparing and guiding girls and boys, especially when the personal dimension of education is demanded as a pedagogical principle.

Preliminary research describes possible benefits of the coincidence of gender of pupil and teacher: “Both boys and girls feel more at ease, pay more attention, and participate more in classroom activities when their teachers are of the same sex”<sup>45</sup> and which may manifest itself, for example, in better academic outcomes for boys and for girls.<sup>46</sup>

Certain ideologies see schools as places that reproduce social inequalities. Without doubt, this is in part verified by the current numerical inequality between male and female teachers. The percentage increase of the latter and the decrease of male teachers is patent. Perhaps the fact that our girls and boys witness this inequality daily in their schools facilitates the reproduction of these professional stereotypes.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Pilar Ballarín, *La educación de las mujeres en la España contemporánea*, Síntesis, Madrid, 2001, p. 155.

<sup>46</sup> See, for example : Von Steffen Kröhnert and Reiner Klingholz, *Not am Mann. Von Helden der Arbeit zur neuen Unterschicht?*, Berlin-Institut, 2007. The study demonstrates that many pedagogues are of the opinion that, in the growth of boys, examples of male roles are of primary importance. Fathers, as well as male educators and teachers should guarantee the guidance of boys for their own development. The concern stems from the fact that increasingly, boys grow up without male role models. In 2005 in Germany there were 2.6 million single parents, and of these, 2.2 million were women. When their children reach kindergarden and primary school, they encounter practically no male personnel, and for this reason, one reads of the “feminization” of the education system. Americans define the problem by using the adjective “fatherless”. Also in: Antonia Loick, “German Boys: Problem Children?” *Goethe-Institut*, maio de 2004, “Waltraud Cornelissen of the German Youth Institute in Munich also suggests considering the importance of images of masculinity defined at the cultural level, and perhaps even at the local or sub cultural level, as an explanation for the failure of boys in school”.

<sup>47</sup> Leonard Sax, *Boys Adrift: The Five Factors Driving the Growing Epidemic of Unmotivated Boys and Underachieving Young Men*, Basic Books, New York, 2007; Michael Gurian, *Boys and Girls Learn Differently!* Jossey-Bass, 2002, p. 57, 65; Christina Hoff Sommers, *La guerra contra los chicos. Cómo un feminismo mal entendido está dañando a los chicos jóvenes*. Palabra, Madrid, 2006, p. 12-13; Dan Kindlon e Michael Thompson, *Educando a Caín. Cómo proteger la vida emocional del varón*, Atlántida, Buenos Aires, 2000, p. 61, 69.

Moreover, various writers have called attention to other problems: recently, some studies in Germany have examined school problems of boys, demanding an education better adapted to their needs. Among the proposal presented is an increase in male teachers.<sup>48</sup> In the United States as well, voices have been raised that speak of the need to study the consequences of the feminization of the teaching profession. This may lead to childhood education that is adapted to girls and to their learning rates that are more advanced than those of boys. School dropout rates, which are much higher for boys, may be related to all of this.<sup>49</sup>

Similarly, the reactions and attitudes that boys generally demonstrate – greater motor activity, the interpretation of risk as challenge, less maturity in speaking, etc. – could be interpreted as anti-academic or as disobedience or as a threat to the climate sought in the classroom, and not understood by teachers who do not have sufficient knowledge of these differences, which are frequently ignored in teacher training courses within Schools of Education.

In regard to gender stereotypes, in a school for girls with female teachers, the latter serve as feminine models that include such activities as technology or competitive sports. In a school of boys with male teachers, the latter can be models of expressive possibilities in areas such as poetry, singing, etc. “Boys benefit from the presence of male teachers and male authority figures that serve them as models for academic study, professional commitment, moral and athletic leadership, and the ability to express emotion. The presence of a man can have an extremely tranquilizing effect over a group of boys. When a boy feels totally accepted – when he feels that his developmental capacities and his behavior are normal and that others recognize them as such

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<sup>48</sup> Dan Kindlon e Michael Thompson, *Educando a Caín. Cómo proteger la vida emocional del varón*, Atlántida, Buenos Aires, 2000, p. 82.

<sup>49</sup> Cornelius Riordan, *Girls and boys in school. Together or separate?* Teachers College Press, Columbia University, 1990, p. 49

– he becomes much more deeply and meaningfully committed to the learning experience. These are the qualities that make some schools for boys – with a teaching faculty that is mostly male and a learning program designed for the needs of boys – learning environments that are particularly effective for boys.”<sup>50</sup> Riordan arrives at a similar conclusion: “The primary aspect of single-sex schools to be considered is the fact that they supply girls and boys with better models of professional success for each sex. Teachers, counselors, and colleagues present gender models with appropriate attitudes for students from infancy onward. Single-sex schools can be particularly beneficial for girls, given that the best students in all academic years are girls, and therefore appropriate to serve as models. Furthermore, the teaching faculties of schools for girls are usually female. Something similar may be said about schools for boys. In them, we find more pro-academic male gender models, legitimizing the fact of being a good student, although male.”<sup>51</sup>

Individualized education, that seeks to stimulate the student to direct his or her life, has developed some pedagogical peculiarities that prove its efficacy. One of them is individual tutoring that, more than group tutoring, provides this stimulus to the individuality of the person to seek the path that the student defines. As we have said, the experience has been extremely positive. Perhaps one should explore what role is played by the fact that the tutor is of the same gender as the student.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> There is little written on this subject; of interest are the thoughts of Xavier Serra, *Qué será mejor: profesores o profesoras? Análisis de la diferenciación sexual en los claustros educativos*, in *Por la diferencia hacia la igualdad*, Granada, EASSE, 2008.

<sup>51</sup> Susan S. Klein, *Handbook for Achieving Sex Equity Through Education*, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1985, p. 189-217.

<sup>52</sup> Fred A. Mael, “Single-sex and coeducational schooling: Relationships to socioemotional and academic development”, *Review of Educational Research*, 68:2, 1998, p. 101-129; Nancy M. Monaco e Eugene Gaier, “Single-sex versus coeducational environment and achievement in adolescent females”, *Adolescence*, 1992, p. 27; A. W. Astin, “On the failure of educational policy”, *Change*, 1977, p. 40-45; D. G. Smith, “Women’s colleges and coed colleges: Is there a difference for women?”, *Journal of Higher Education*, 1990, p. 61.

It is important to look at what type of teachers will most benefit boys and girl, taking into account s the added factor of personal tutoring. If the lesson principally involves teacher/student communication, personal tutoring implies the possibility of “*you – I*” communication that enriches personalization. No one doubts the possibility of good inter-sexual counselor/student communication. Nevertheless, to what extent, in this case, is there possibility for openness and trust and action by the counselor as a living model, from a gender perspective? Can it be that the social conditioners that we have witnessed and described for groups of students do not apply to the student/teacher relationship? As Klein states, “the gender inequalities present in society are found in abundance in coeducational classes; the most common inequalities are segregation by sex, interaction between student and teacher loaded with gender stereotypes ...”<sup>53</sup> Other research has shown, for example, improvements in leadership ability and in self-confidence of girls in exclusively female schools. These studies also call attention to the quality of relations with female teachers.<sup>54</sup>

In individualized education, these issues are of no less importance, given that they have an impact on the heart of its proposal. An education that seeks to open up to the student a maximum number of personal and social possibilities, and free the student of the limits imposed by the environment cannot disregard the question of gender. The persistent inequalities between the sexes from school age onward justify committed actions in the sphere of education. In this sense, single-sex schools can contribute to education a decided gender perspec-

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<sup>53</sup> Susan S. Klein, *Handbook for Achieving Sex Equity Through Education*, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1985, p. 189-217.

<sup>54</sup> Fred A. Macl, “Single-sex and coeducational schooling: Relationships to socioemotional and academic development”, *Review of Educational Research*, 68:2, 1998, p. 101-129; Nancy M. Monaco e Eugene Gaier, “Single-sex versus coeducational environment and achievement in adolescent females”, *Adolescence*, 1992, p. 27; A. W. Astin, “On the failure of educational policy”, *Change*, 1977, p. 40-45; D. G. Smith, “Women’s colleges and coed colleges: Is there a difference for women?”, *Journal of Higher Education*, 1990, p. 61

tive that justifies substantive organizational measures. For the case of individualized education, I consider these measures to be of special educational coherence and importance.

From what has been presented here, one can understand that in itself, the mere establishment of a single-sex school environment provides benefits. Maximum effectiveness is provided, however, involves the intent of the school community to take advantage of this potential the necessary training of teachers in subjects related to gender and education.