

“GENDER MATTERS”

A PRACTICAL APPROACH TO SINGLE-SEX EDUCATION

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INTRODUCTION

From our perspective, after 49 years of experience in education, working uniquely with boys has more advantages than disadvantages. Over 2000 thousand students have benefited from our model of education. In fact, one third of our families are former students; families who appreciate the advantages of our model.

You may argue that working with one gender only -boys in our school- is discriminating against girls in terms of socialization. At least this is what we are sometimes told by some of those who defend the co-educational model. It goes without saying that we do believe both sexes are essential to the wellbeing of our families, society and economy: sharing responsibilities, facing challenges and sorting out problems our society presents day after day.

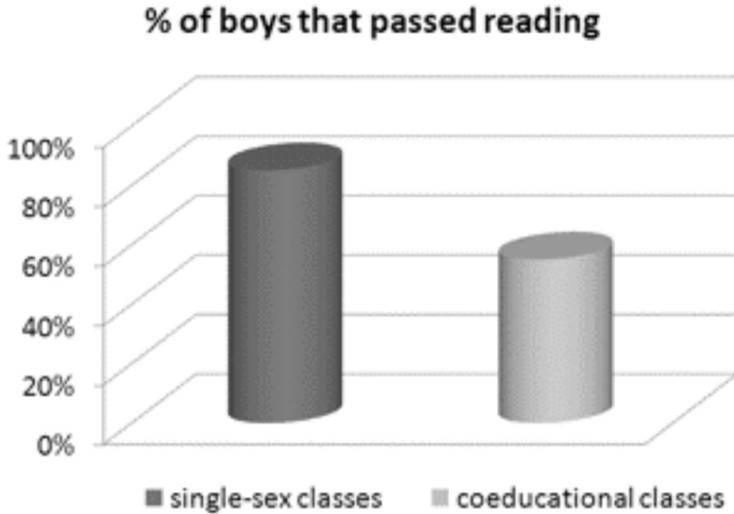
Choosing the best possible environment to educate our children should be the starting point when planning the future of our children. The setting of some core values shared by the Institution, educators and families is essential for success in

such a choice. This decision is crucial in all families and should be regarded as a long-term option since it will cover a time-span of some 12 years, from kindergarten to university, with early to middle adolescence being the most delicate part of it.

School is meant to be a place where one can develop one's true potential in a safe setting, feeling at ease with one's peers and teachers and with the hope of growing physically and emotionally in a reliable atmosphere. Single-sex schools can provide some of these characteristics. Teachers with specific training and programmes adapted to the characteristics of the age group help to fulfil our expectations.

In the last few years, apart from the ordinary educational programmes related specifically to each subject, we have also added a Gender Equality Programme (Pla d'Igualtat) to minimize some gender roles or stereotypes. In fact, it is not clear at all whether the stereotypes are more reinforced in the co-ed schools or in the single-gender ones. Surprisingly enough, some studies advocate that either boys or girls can develop their personality with less pressure in single-sex schools since there is not the "you have to be" factor which means that if you are a boy you cannot be sensitive towards art, for example from an academic point of view, single-sex schools reach higher standards with better results in state exams. There is little argument about that since there is a lot of data supporting this claim. For example the following graph is from a study in an American elementary school: Woodward Avenue Elementary in DeLand, Florida. 85% of boys in single-gender classes passed reading in comparison to 55% in co-educational classes ⁽¹⁾.

SINGLE SEX EDUCATION
AN OPTION IN FOREFRONT OF EDUCATION



THE CHRISTMAS SHOW AND OTHER
CULTURAL ACTIVITIES

We would like now to present you with some specific activities we have in our school. Activities in which it would be more difficult to involve the whole class in a co-educational institution.

With the Christmas show we can illustrate how a cross-curricular project can become a hallmark of a school. Not only because of its reputation among schools and families but because all students from 1st Primary to 4th ESO are involved in it. This show is designed so that over 900 students can take part in this school project.

Being only boys reduces the possible anxiety about getting up on stage to perform. Pupils feel free to express themselves without the “need” to follow the well-known masculine stereotypes. Activities such as writing lyrics, art, dancing, singing, costume making are accepted as normal for them.

The story is always meant to transmit some positive values to our students. The main characters of the story, always pupils who like acting and occasionally some teachers who wish to take part in the show, are the leading threat of the tale and the different classes get on the stage to perform their part of the show. Class teachers are told the whole story some weeks in advance and the part they have to perform on stage. Then, the teachers in charge of different aspects of the show hold different meetings with each class teacher in order that the show has a coordinated line (costumes, singing, dancing...)

We believe that if it were a co-ed school the amount of boys not willing to take part in this project would undoubtedly be much higher. The fact that they are all boys minimises the risk of having to follow the masculine stereotypes.

Obviously, when selecting the music, writing the script or preparing how boys will move around on stage we keep their learning style in mind. For example, music thought for 4th ESO will be more lively than that thought for 1st Primary. Students from 4th ESO -as a group- need something lively so that they can dance and sing expressing all the energy they have inside. When thinking about costumes, we mean them to dress in relation to the story but always bearing in mind they should feel comfortable in such costumes.

Poetry contests, drama and choir are other activities we carry out at school. It is well known that girls outperform boys in coed institutions. We are very concerned with all these activities and present them so that all our students take part in them (apart from some exceptions). Again, in all such activities boys can express themselves freely, develop their inner potential and grow individually as people. The boys' self esteem is safe because of the provided premises. As German Duclos points out in his book "there is a need to understand, therefore, that developing the self esteem is an important factor in the prevention of, and protection from boys' learning difficulties.

All of us, as educators, must be aware of and be concerned about the self esteem concept of our students. The acceptance of the boys' different capacities –and limitations sometimes– has to be understood as starting point for building a secure personality in each of our students. Of course, academic results are important in our competitive society but a person is something else apart from data. If we accept the premise that a secure environment for our students is adequate (not ideal) for the development of their personality we may conclude by saying that educating our children in single-sex schools provides better chances of achieving our goals.

CONCLUSION

Not long ago, I spent some time talking to some students who had recently incorporated into our school from other schools in Barcelona. To my surprise, the main difference from the previous schools to ours was not their peers but the close relationship they had with teachers in our school. For them, their relationship with their classmates was fine; but they pointed out the way teachers treated them as “better”. Whether this a coincidence or a fact to be applied to all single-sex schools is not clear but it is a factor which should be analysed in depth.

All educational systems have pros and cons and there is no clear cut difference which permits any one of them to be called “good” or “bad”. But if we are told to choose the best option according to our criteria it becomes clear that single-sex schools offer better chances of success in the education of our children as they allow them to fully develop their capacities in a positive environment.

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