

SINGLE-SEX EDUCATION: HISTORICAL REGRESSION OR BETTERMENT IN THE EDUCATION SYSTEM?

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A NEW FEATURE TO CHOOSE

When we, as parents, think of selecting a school that will contribute in a positive and active way on our family projects, we often come across with several options related to the applied methodology, the set of values, the existence or inexistence of a religious education as well as the option of a single-sex or a mixed education.

Each of these features impact in our children's development while making the school an extension of our family values. Every day more proposals are oriented towards mixed education. Education as a process of continuous improvement needs to provide our children with the advantages of personalized education being able to cover each and every need that their specific personality demands comprising their personal depth as men or woman.

The responsibility of education belongs to the parents as a right. However, no one is born all knowingly as to parenting skills; one must research, prepare, and understand what implications each decision has in our children. There are no perfect

schools, the school roll is to help parents in the education of their children, contribute to each family project and find out in each student a unique and irreplaceable human being.

Educational layouts have evolved through the ages, adapting to the necessities of people and the social environment. There have been many among the protagonist of these changes: philosophers, sociologists, psychologists, pedagogues, government authorities or ecclesiastical. All of them with the same objective that encloses education: the improvement in men and women through their development.

It is transparent that while seeking this improvement there have been layouts that work out and some others that prove to be inefficient or impossible to carry out. In the last few decades the great educational controversy has been assembled in the equality among sexes, basically dividing the educational praxis in two layouts: single-sex education and mixed education.

In our country, Mexico, that discussion goes back 20 years approximately when, answering mainly to economic issues, private education migrates to a mixed system. Moreover, gender politics rose as an expression of freedom about this time. The fact that nature determines the sex during gestation and that it is in the family, scholar and social womb where our behavior, thoughts and feelings are educated and cultivated was set aside. Even though gender is a more common used to differentiate men and women it is more convenient to use the term sex for purposes of this study since it is the organic condition that differentiates the male from the female where human beings, animals and plants are concerned¹.

¹ *Diccionario de la Real Academia Española*, (1992), Espasa, Madrid

FROM DIFFERENTIAL PEDAGOGY TO SINGLE-SEX EDUCATION

1. Single-Sex Education

Single-Sex education is a pedagogical style based on sex personal components¹. It deals altogether with the first trade of human diversity, male or female, as a feature that builds up many conducts of the student in the learning process. Thus said, there is no partiality on the matter. Single-Sex education nourishes academic freedom and divergence. It adapts to the human condition of men and women completely and strengthens their abilities at an established development rhythm accordingly. Thus, Single-Sex Education embodies an efficient answer towards these needs, since it guaranties equal opportunities between men and women, with goals such as:

1. Improve academic performance
2. Provide the student with a stress free environment among the male students and female pupils.
3. Respect working rhythms and special abilities associated with each sex.
4. Strengthen learner's self-esteem.

2. Mixed Education

The notion of Mixed Education alludes to a practice where male and female students reside in the same classroom, receive the same teachings, comply with the same demands and submit to equal evaluations. Mixed Education requires and needs a purposeful and explicit intervention that must take off with the revision of sexist patterns in society as well as with the supervision of institutions in which the individuals' life unravels, specially the institutions linked with education, considering that it is while educating that female and male stereotypes are broken.

¹ Cfr, García Hoz, V., *Principios de pedagogía sistemática*, p. 346

The established goals for Mixed Education in the Mexican Educative System are²:

1. Endorse personal development of each student in relationship with others
2. Educate in equal opportunities, rights and responsibilities
3. Educate in joint responsibility of men and woman in every field of reference
4. Educate for coexistence in a plural society

This set of goals oversees Mexican Education today and even though it corresponds to the goals of education in general it is presented as if Mixed Education was the only vehicle to achieve them.

Single-Sex Education and Mixed Education within their historical context

Throughout History there have been many people involved in the educative reformations among the different counties. For many years the Catholic Church became teacher, the responsibility of education was laid upon its shoulders because it was within the Church that books and tools for actual learning were withhold. It was until 1870 that the State starts fighting for secularism and dismisses the Church from this part. Hence, the State will be the new responsible for education and its organization in order to deliver a real “public service”.

Our Education Systems commence in Europe towards mid eighteenth century, where men and woman had different social destinies to fulfill so education was meant to be disjointed. New reformations included the right of education and the obligation of the State to provide it for all the population. Education proposals were mainly for boys, girls were restricted to religious education and housekeeping. The main argument was

² Plan Nacional de Educación, Secretaría de Educación Publica, México.

that women did not need to study or to cultivate their minds because this would take their heads away from their chores as mothers and housewives, so they were only allowed a basic education. The subjects of their study were related to the home and the arts.

Women's education history can be divided in four periods:

1. From Ancient Times to 1880: No education for girls.
2. From 1900 to First World War: A limited instruction, not for all of them and only basic levels.
3. Period between wars and up until 1950: Almost the same instruction for girls and boys in separate ways.
4. 1960-70: Conjoint teaching of boys and girls, Mixed education period began (not every were)³.

Rousseau thought of as the father of modern pedagogy, sets completely different principles for the education of boys and girls. In his most famous book *Emile*, the educational process is based upon the respect of personality and the experience that should give the learner the adequate knowledge to become a person with criteria, independence and freedom. Sophia's education (character from the same novel) keeps a low and dependent profile, because a woman's destiny is to serve men. Rousseau declares that a similar education will make Sophia independent and will ruin the rest of her life.

This perception asserts that men require a process that will allow them to unfold their nature, while women need all means available to force them into their subordination role. Hereafter, she will have to be contradicted, dined her will and disorient her criteria so she will not feel capable and will not rebel against her condition of subordination.

Women of that time began to speak in favor of instruction of their sex, on behalf of the benefit this will bring to their children's education as a result of the time they spent with them.

³ Cfr, M. Fize, *Educación Diferenciada*, p. 42

These first voices heard at the end of the eighteenth century and beginning of the nineteenth century were mainly those of aristocratic women, but through the nineteenth century this claim will become a voice with many different faces, seeking every woman's right to education⁴.

Towards the end of the eighteenth century and beginning of the nineteenth changes in legislation of many countries began to sprout. Education law intended education for both genders, but boys and girls should be educated in different schools and with different teachings. It started with the inclusion of the lowest class, training them to be able to work. It was until 1821 when the necessity of teaching them to read, write, count, saw and pray could no longer be postponed.

Headed for 1880 proposals of a more serious education for women, equivalent to that of men, start to get strong. To get educational equity meant the introduction to high and secondary education and that boys and girls were educated in the same centers to upgrade academic quality. Accordingly to each country's culture this measure was adopted or dismissed. Protestant countries in their majority, established Mixed Education, and the separatist model prevailed in Catholic countries mainly. As a consequence of this polarization analysis and observation derived, and both models began to be under meticulous observation for the advantages and disadvantages each of them brought to the students.

Secularism and Rationalism were also part of this process, the notion of equality among every individual along with the opposition to clergy had great influence up until the twentieth century, where Mixed Education was established as such with grand impact all over Europe.

In 1970 liberal and progressive movements start to spring around the globe. These movements affect pedagogy directly and used conjoint education as the banner of their achievements. Until recently, many years went by without restating

⁴ *idem*, p. 54

the subject of Mixed Education; no one questioned the apparent neutrality and equality of the Education System for boys and girls.

During the beginning of the 80's divided education in various countries around Europe and America seemed to be dying a slow death; most of the schools for boys were vocational, while girls' schools were of little importance. Many of the traditional centers changed for Mixed Education, some of them required merging. The exceptions were schools administered by religious orders, which held on to their vision of separate education.

When the 90's arrived to question the dogma of Mixed Education was enough to make anyone into a retrograde or radical, the democratic argument got strong. Even so, surprisingly at the end of this decade, liberal and feminist movements began to question the dogma and demanded the recognition of mixed schools' failure as well as the necessity to accept that boys and girls are different and so they need a separate Education.

Nowadays, acknowledging the efficiency of separate education some countries have adopted the new model in public schools named "single-sex", which provides with separate classes for boys and girls within the same school in specific ages and subjects. . Nevertheless, the remaining mixed institutions operate under economic issues, even when the belief that inequity and discrimination is long gone there are circumstances that still affect one and the other. Today analysis of the biological and social, different behavior and attitudes, physical and mental aptitudes, research in neuroscience, endocrinology and genetics, development psychology, among others show that the difference between genders goes further along from historical or cultural aspects and that are imprinted in each sexes' nature.

The change to a single-sex layout would imply huge adjustments on the budget and there have been few who have ventured, even after acknowledging that single-sex education helps to achieve the pedagogical, social and moral objectives that mixed education has failed to obtain.

Anglo-Saxon countries have a certain advantage regarding single-sex education, since this form of instructing is more common every day and grows among their public schools. Parents claim has forced the implementation of new measures, however, countries with lower resources hold on to the mixed layout despite the low academic performance. Cornelius Riordan says that the success obtained by the American schools, among the campus of mixed schools, that offer single-sex subjects has brought a wider academic, social and emotional development to the students⁵.

Even though mixed education is the most common layout on highly developed countries, there is no International Human Rights text that declares this is the only and legitimate option. In Unesco's text on educative matters is written "the foundation or maintenance of separate teaching systems or establishments" will not be discriminated. There are three situations that are not considered as discrimination within schools accepted worldwide⁶:

- Separate schools for boys and girls; separate schools with religious or linguistic motifs; private schools

Men and women: equal but different?

The definition of person is born from the comedies and tragedies that represented famous characters, since the actor would wore a mask (*Greek: prosopon*) to cover his face and would receive the name of person because he preserved his dignity behind it.

Thus, person is the most perfect thing there is in nature, is the subsistent being in the rational nature. This subsistence gives the person a great dignity considering it as such. Whichever the nature of this "person" is, it is making reference to whatever is different in that nature, and so human nature is this

⁵ III Congreso Internacional sobre educación diferenciada, EASSE, 2011

⁶ Programa de Educación Unesco, bienio 2010-2012

flesh, this bones, this soul, which are the principles that make a being unique and make it human person. This term is also applied to divinity, the Holy Trinity are three different persons and the one and only true God, giving each one of them the dignity of person yet divine⁷.

The person as a whole can only be male or female in unity with body and soul. Masculinity or femininity transcends all the aspects of their lives: from the physical to the psychological. Personal growth is conditioned by biological, cultural, social and familiar aspects. Men and women have a personal character and thus equality belongs to them. What many people nowadays seek is to make uniform and that is violent, it is unfair.

A person's search of identity is a long and influenced by those who have already made their own; grown up people that intervene powerfully through the media and publicity, as the rules of society from which they are part of. Hence, sex is a biological characteristic that divides human beings in two grate groups: male and female. As boys and girls grow old they acquire a sexual identity, proclaiming "I am a girl" or "I am a boy". Sex is established from the moment of birth with "it is a girl or it is a boy" and from that moment on they are taught to be man or woman in many different ways and through many different people or institutions that surround the life of this newborn.

Neuronal, biochemical and behavioral facts constitute experiences and expectative, which have direct relation with gender identity, this is known as⁸:

- Gender roles: Behavior, interests, attitudes, abilities and trades that a certain culture considers appropriate for man and woman.

⁷ Cfr. Martínez, J., (2003), *Diccionario Teológico de Santo Tomás*, Madrid: EDIBESA, p. 693

⁸ Cfr. Papalia, D., Wendkos, S., (1988), *Psicología*, México: Mc Graw Hill, p. 458-461

- Gender Typing: Socialization process through which boys and girls learn at an early stage appropriate gender roles.
- Gender Stereotypes: Preconceived generalization about a specific behavior for a male or female role.

The real problem comes after the stereotypes, which comprises thoughts based upon ideas not proven and that bring along discrimination or a feeling of inequity among peers. It is a reality that men and women must be treated differently not because of their condition but because of their individuality. To stereotype is to limit expectations and force behavior to fit with them.

It is from here that the confusion of various genders originates: male heterosexual, female heterosexual, homosexual, lesbian, bisexual and undefined. So, masculinity and femininity, in a physical and psychic level, are not alone in the category of natural derivatives of the biological sexual dichotomy, justifying any sexual activity. It is so that the discussion around genders selection according to the stage that any human being's life is undergoing tends to forget what nature itself has given. This great deceit implies a devastating attack against family and marriage, using ambiguous language and exercising free will, mainly human, as a banner.

It is easy to see that this will not bring happiness to human beings, but in the path a great confusion that exposes to vulnerability has been achieved, without the understanding that the principle is in the acceptance of the own corporeality and that without it there would be nothing but a physical, emotional, psychic and spiritual unbalance. Integrating these aspects constitutes the making of a proper identity. A person acquires progressively the conscience of being oneself, unveils its identity and obtains then a sexual, cultural and psychosocial identity.

Equal rights among men and women are the basic principle of coexistence, which answer to our dignity as human be-

ings. Real equality does not mean uniformity. Equality among persons from an ontological point of view means that we are equal and have the same rights just because we are persons. Nevertheless, this is what makes us individuals, different. Equal in dignity and different in our individuality

Men and woman are two different and original versions of the unique human, each person is exceptional and irreplaceable, a complete structure not fragmented, a being that is born and changing with each passing day, experimenting biological, cultural, social and familiar facts in its development. These facts will give us true freedom when developing our own capacities to reach the abundance to which each human is destined.

Arguments on the Single-Sex Education and Mixed Education

School education based upon the separation of sexes or single-sex education has solid arguments, such are those of Ingbert von Martial⁹ exposed subsequently:

a) Gender anthropology

Genders anthropology, according to Schellenberger¹⁰, is concerned with the theoretical approach to the partition of sexes at school. The biological fundament of differentiation of sexes is constituted by the difference between men and women directly linked to the sexual functions and particular genetic characteristics.

Genders anthropology is entirely bound to the sexes division at school, fundament of single-sex education, in the search of equal possibilities to acquire knowledge and develop qualities accordingly with maturity rhythms and academic achievement of each one. Helene Lange declares that in order to have boys and girls manifesting their possibilities there is no need of sin-

⁹ Cfr, J.M., Barrio, *Educación Diferenciada una opción razonable*, EUNSA, España. Capítulo I

¹⁰ idem p. 65

gle-sex planning of any sort, contents must be essentially equal for both sexes and it is in the teaching that the specific impulse of each sex must be respected¹¹.

b) Each sex particular development without prejudice of equality of opportunities

Equal opportunities are a recurrent and important subject in the upmost educational layouts debate. Single-sex education knows that contents must be the same for boys and girls; nevertheless, the advantage is that themes are oriented in a differentiated way answering to each sex's demands.

c) Encouragement towards learning certain subjects

It is out of question that there are some subjects that hold more interest for girls than boys and vice versa, this might be related to their skills in developing around it. Single-sex education nourishes this potentiality, while defenders of mixed education talk about the different contributions to the same areas. Reality is that when there is no interest whatsoever in a specific subject the reaction is that of apathy and reject towards the challenge presented¹².

d) Adaptation to individual aspects of students within teaching

Education requires personalization: be conscious that the pupil is a holistic being, considering its academic-professional, human, social, religious-doctrinal and ascetic-spiritual dimensions¹³. To keep individualities in mind might be the difference of learning success. This is affected by the difference in sex, we can observe it in:

- Different skills for learning: Languages, spatial representation, mathematics, etc.

¹¹ *ídem* p.67

¹² *ídem* p. 69

¹³ V. García Hoz, (1989), *El concepto de persona*, EUNSA, España

- Difference on motivation towards the contents, selected topics for one and the others.
- Behavioral differences that affect class dynamic directly¹⁴.

e) Protected Environment

It has been in various discussions that Single-sex education has defended that separation protects boys and girls. More than a sexual prejudice it stands for a condition of safe environment where each sex can develop without the pressure of the other, such as physical aggression in the earlier stages or of sexual nature in the adolescence, however cognitive and emotional qualities are shielded¹⁵.

Historical regression or betterment in the Education System

The inclusion of women in the world of learning has been one great break-through for human society regarding equality and justice. This has allowed females to enter the working and professional world, and now, also the political spheres.

As I have been writing, this was outrageous to think of only a few decades ago. Little by little, western civilization has begun to change since the inclusion of women in schools and now in the shared classrooms. It has been proved that men as women are able to perform almost every activity, if they are properly trained, so it will be impossible to go back to an educational system that does not prepares a woman as a professional, even when the strategies to acquire and execute professional competence differ among them.

Single-Sex education does not seek to regress; it does not look back but forward. It aims to be an alternative option to an education system that cannot or will not distinguish men

¹⁴ Cfr, J.M., Barrio, (2005), *Educación Diferenciada una opción razonable*, EUNSA, España. Capítulo I p.69-70

¹⁵ idem p. 70-72

from women and because of it; sometimes it lacks the time or resources to comply with their individuality. To know the academic progress of man and woman results in an education system that allows each one to reach personal fulfillment, answering to the each sexes' needs and complementing them at the same time.

Single-sex education in the twenty first century makes no reference to the contents, we currently know that men and women have equal capacities and have the same right to education. Single-sex education in this century seeks to offer boys and girls an education system adequate to their own needs and growing rhythms, to help them mature and find their true identity in an satisfactory environment and climate, taking on account the human faculties and the time to enhance them.

Even though in some cases single-sex education is considered retrograde, reality is that it represents betterment to de education system, when the aim is to take each pupil to their personal fulfillment. It is not that single-sex education is the panacea for all the learning disabilities that we know today; although it has shown effective to overcome the gender stereotypes, to guarantee equal opportunities and to fight school failure¹⁶.

Mixed education has brought many experiences and basis that work against its layout or against its implementation in most of the education systems worldwide. Some of these are:

- Mixed education does not carry out didactic strategies for each sex. It is the adaptation of a male model to the presence of woman in the classrooms. There are no modifications considering needs or capacities.
- There is no reflection on the different qualities between sexes, woman have been more affected by this

¹⁶ Conclusiones del Simposio Internacional sobre Familias, Educación y género, Barcelona, España 2005

since there is no admittance of subjects that favor feminine development.

- Contents are still sexist, indulging males, when we are trying to unify it is always in masculine terms since it is easier for a girl to adapt, for example, to an adventure reading than for a boy to read a romantic novel.

Social and political movements have a new motto “above right to equality stands right to difference” leaving mixed education defenseless, since its main claim was to correlate men and women. This is why now, more than ever, to renew the concepts of feminine and masculine is imperative.

Only through freedom can we truly educate: freedom to educate, to educate oneself and in educating. It is a positive value for society that there are educative centers that respond to personal and social development needs of men and women, without letting be influence by social prejudice or by the imposition of behavior stereotypes or political interests.

Education requires great efforts in every aspect, having solid education projects as well as parent’s commitment assuming their roles as main educators. At the same time society must protect families and schools to provide with free environments and the inception to plural education.

Decision on children education comprises parents as the diversity of choices is a right that belongs to them.

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