

BETWEEN TABOO AND SUCCESS

SINGLE-SEX EDUCATION FROM THE POINT OF VIEW OF ITS ACTORS

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INTRODUCTION

Beginning in the 1970s, single-sex education in our country was banned – not by law, but in practice – from the private and public education systems, and replaced by coeducation, through the National Ministry of Education Decree-Law n° 482 of November 28, 1972, exactly 40 years ago. Only a small number of some boarding schools, other schools, and professional training centers today maintain this kind of organization.

The objective of the research upon which my book, *“Between Taboo and Success. The Case of single-Sex Education”* (Freitas, 2011) was based was to try to understand how the actors involved in the process of single-sex education (students, former students, parents, teachers, and principals) think about the model, what representations they inherited and constructed, and how these fit in to the organizational culture. To this end, I performed a qualitative analysis of documents, field notes, and interviews carried out with 36 actors of three single-sex non-boarding schools, founded by a group of parents beginning in 1978 in the north and south of the country.

1. A FAMILY ENVIRONMENT

These schools with single-sex education were founded by a group of parents beginning in 1978; that is, just after the beginning of the process of the generalization of coeducation in public and private schools, and clearly against the current of the government policy of that time, and with the organizational status quo that they established and have continued during these three decades. These parents, and the actors in general, sought to create a type of environment within which it would be more efficient to transmit the type of education that they desired:

- a. A concept of a school “for learning”, focused on academic outcomes achieved by each student and committed to education in a system of values;
- b. A family environment characterized by kindness and friendship, by interpersonal relations between the various actors;
- c. A “*voluntary community*” (Riordan, 2007), characterized by identity, commitment (including economic) and made up of families desiring freedom of choice in education who want to guarantee the transmission of an academic culture of excellence and of a particular system of values for their children;
- d. A personalized education, similar to that transmitted by the family, sharing and respecting the needs and concrete characteristics of the students;
- e. A school with an identity, with symbols such as emblems, uniforms, sashes, living values, participation, and commitment to tasks and responsibilities, relations of friendship and trust among the actors, and resistance to outside animosity.

The actors recognize that here we have an environment that is in a sense protected, different from the outside reality, and

that demands an effort of continuous training and coherence on the part of everyone. Part of the culture of the schools, from the foundation and establishment of their principles, is the unity with parents, fostered through sharing in the property, tutoring, training meetings, and family collaboration. Also, at the leadership level parents are present within the executive framework of these institutions. This need to be in tune with parents is most felt due to the development and changes of values that also impacts the institution of the family, and that demands a continual effort in training and close relations between school officials, teachers, and parents so that they may share objectives and beliefs and the attainment of a good school for their children.

2. SATISFACTION, THE PRESSURES OF PREJUDICE, AND FREEDOM OF CHOICE

In general, those interviewed – as students, former students, parents, and principals – positively assess their experience with single-sex education before and after 1974. The most valued aspects are academic training, the values defended, the environment and interpersonal relations of friendship between students and teachers. They view the system with naturalness, some due to having experienced it from a young age; others through habit or being convinced of the benefits of the objectives, processes and outcomes of a personalized education. In fact, only the students who entered the system at its third phase (7th to 9th grade) showed more difficulty in adapting. Although generally, they favor this division into phases, some of the students prefer that secondary schooling be coeducational, due to economic factors, because the school does not offer all areas of study, and to try/enjoy another kind of socialization.

Those interviewed say that others – practically all people and entities outside of the process – have negative views of

single-sex education, due to having an organization different from generalized coeducation. The lack of acceptance of differences, the identification with the kind of school organization proposed by the former “New State” and by religious orders, the accusation of elitism common to private schools at which students wear a uniform, awareness of the need for socialization with the opposite sex, together with the fear of psychological imbalance or the lack of integration of young people within society are manifestations of an attitude that the actors classify as prejudice and that, at the same time, represents for them a negative pressure, also accentuates the construction of identity. In any case, they feel that single-sex education is a pedagogical option taken by parents, whose freedom of choice is limited by the cost of private schooling.

In terms of the historical, political, and economic context of the implementation of single-sex education and coeducation, only the adults make a link between coeducation and the “May 1968 Revolution” in France and the “April 25, 1974 Revolution” in Portugal, in spite of there having existed, for demographic reasons, coeducational schools throughout the country before the 1970s, and the fact that the government decree that mandated coeducation preceded the Veiga Simão Reform. The same adults believe that the change in school organization did not have pedagogical and scientific motives, but rather economic and logistic ones related to the universalization of free schooling and the desire to make a break with the past that is typical of revolutions. In this view, compared to same-sex education, coeducation is a system that fosters equality of opportunity and socialization between sexes and social classes for students and teachers, without discrimination.

In any case, in terms of economic/logistic conditions, the actors recognize that single-sex education is more expensive (two buildings, two sets of administrators, two faculties, two groups of non-teaching personnel) and beyond the political connotation and conservatism, attribute to this factor the lack of

this type of education offering in Portugal and the difficulty facing its expansion. On the other hand, they note the lack of economic support on the part of the State to parents who wish to opt for private schooling, requiring the adoption of a single curriculum for the concession of a parallel pedagogy.

Although the actors recognize that students within single-sex institutions come from the upper middle class, they attribute this fact not to a desire for elitism on the part of the institution or the families, but rather to the economic restraints that are placed upon private schooling in general. This high expense is recognized by students as a sacrifice by their parents, while the parents consider it to be an investment that they wish to make for their children.

3. SINGLE-SEX EDUCATION BY GENDER

In regard to concepts of gender, those interviewed stated that they perceive essential differences between the sexes in terms of characteristics, interests, pace of psychological development, forms of learning, and approaches to problems. These differences are seen as an entry profile that demands single-sex education, which means affirmative action in regard to gender, in contrast to coeducation, which seeks to offer a neutral and equal education, without taking into account neither disparities of growth and maturity nor conflicts generated between the sexes.

There does not appear to exist, however, as an objective on the part of the organization, the level of institutional documents, nor on the level of representation of the actors an exit profile directly related to gender differentiation or the construction of the same, pointing toward a separation in regard to ideology.

However, one can identify among the educators a line of thinking linked to the awareness of the need to prepare auton-

omous women and men who act within society on the basis of equality of opportunity, and that the value and are able to reconcile their respective differences, family life, and interpersonal relations, which approaches what one may term a “feminism of difference”.

4. “EXPERIENCE-BASED KNOWLEDGE” THAT FUNCTIONS SCIENTIFICALLY WITH SUCCESS

Without possessing a profound knowledge of neurological, psychological, and sociological studies that, in spite of controversy and within limits forms a scientific basis for justification of the skills/difficulties, aptitudes, ways of understanding differentiated realities according to gender, those interviewed identified empirically the diversity and pedagogical and educational potentials of single-sex education described by scholars and treated by critics.

All of the actors believe that single-sex education facilitates better learning and academic outcomes, in that this modality makes possible greater focus upon studies, motivation, self-demands, and discipline. Namely, the outcomes in disciplines linked to gender (languages, mathematics, physics and chemistry) are better in single-sex education. Although some of these outcomes may be due to the conditions of private education, in single-sex education classrooms are more homogeneous and the language utilized the approach and adaptation of the curriculum (supposedly neutral) imposed by government policy, the choices of textbooks are differentiated according to the public present. Teachers identify subjects and themes to which the students give more attention, differentiated forms and strategies of teaching and of motivation, of using free time, of channeling aggression and the masculine need for physical activity, or fostering the self-esteem and risk-taking on the part of girls.

The problems related to physical and psychological changes in infancy and adolescence are treated in a differentiated fashion and timing in single-sex education: girls are two years in front of boys. The actors feel that single-sex education leads to fewer distractions in the classroom, and inhibitions in regard to the opposite sex, particularly in adolescence and in subjects most linked to gender (languages and mathematics). Namely, they claim that the choices of areas and courses made by students are carried out with more freedom by boys and girls.

The opposite sex may be a source of distraction that tends to “destabilize” the classroom due to the competitiveness, affective relations, and conflicts created. Coeducation frequently generates an inhibiting environment and aggressive and sexist exchanges and humiliations on the part of both sexes, instead of creating respect and admiration for differences. In contrast, single-sex education, besides allowing young people to feel at ease, spontaneous and natural, develops self-esteem and fosters profound and lasting friendships.

Academic success is attributed, in spite of everything and more than to single-sex education, to student effort, to personalized accompaniment, and to the quality and continuity of teachers. The teachers, who are of the same sex as their students, as seen as models, and such a role is demanded of them – namely at the level of tutoring, which is an instrument exclusive to Personalized Education.

Moreover, the actors believe that single-sex education facilitates an axiom-based education within Aristotelian-humanistic ethical values, with a uniform target public for educational planning and action. In particular, single-sex education makes possible sex education that is less conflictual, less inhibitory, and more complete.

5. HOMOGENEITY/SOCIALIZATION/ HETEROGENEITY

Socialization with the opposite sex is a subject of great concern for all of those interviewed. All of them believe that this is a necessary value for personality development, and that it is essential to guarantee it, but at the level of the family, in order to prepare young people for their integration in a workplace and in a society in which the sexes are mixed. But schools themselves, and particularly the classroom do not have socialization as their primary objective: “*schools are for learning*”.

Although they recognize attraction to the opposite sex in adolescence, the young people – but also the adults – deny the need of coexistence and continual interaction within the school. In particular, the boys react against social pressures – which according to them are excessive – in regard to social relations with the opposite sex or the early assumption of commitments. If it is true, they say, that single-sex education delays or complicates relations with the opposite sex, it does not impede it. Both through sporadic activities or events, such as after classes or in extracurricular activities, students enrolled in institutions with single-sex education to acquire this socialization. Moreover, in coeducation, as shown in the studies of Maccoby & Jacklin (1985) and of Maccoby (1999), due to differences of interests, one sees a *de facto* gender separation in and outside of classes. As a means of reconciling the two models, those who feel most greatly the lack of the opposite sex within the school – students of the 3rd phase of Primary Education – suggest that classes be separated and time between classes be mixed.

In regard to balanced personalities, and contrary to generalized concerns, the actors state that students enrolled in single-sex education are balanced and that they respect differences, without excluding the need for vigilance and the need to take

action in cases of more closed young people and families, in order to guarantee socialization.

CONCLUSION

Within a society that presents itself not only as mixed, but also as democratic and multi-cultural, the problem tends to go beyond simply coexistence with the opposite sex, with other social classes, or with other cultures: how can schools and education programs efficiently integrate and develop the recognition and respect for differences? This is an issue that involves a concept of tolerance that must include identity, self-recognition, and the recognition of others. Neutrality as the negation of diversity does not appear to be the solution. The possibility of providing to each person who is “different” that which he or she needs does not necessarily mean discrimination, segregation, or inequality, but rather it calls for a different kind of justice. There is no doubt that whenever one separates, one loses something. But given that the gender difference is “*the mother of all other differences*”, whether social or cultural, why not approach it in a differentiated manner?

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