Embracing Differences

Choices in Education
In 2006, the Title IX regulation for schools was broadened to include the choice of voluntary single-sex education for students, as long as there are equal opportunities for co-ed classes, or for the excluded sex. Since 2006, there has been an increase of single-sex schools and classes cropping up around the country.

With more opportunity to place their children in single-sex education settings, parents must consider all their options. Single-sex education may enhance students’ learning abilities and behavior in classrooms, which would allow for more advanced and focused learning.

“In a co-ed classroom setting, it would be difficult to reconcile the two necessary teaching styles needed to achieve maximum results for the students” (Schramm). Girls develop writing skills at a younger age than boys. This can lead boys to be frustrated with themselves when they cannot perform at the same level as girls can, and chalk it up to not being good at writing. “In single-sex classes or single-sex schools, the teacher would be able to con-
Michael Gurian, founder of the Gurian Institute, and Kathy Stevens, Gurian Institute training director, in their co-authored article, “With Boys and Girls in Mind,” describe the developmental stages which allow for the success of girls in the classroom. Generally at a younger age, girls tend to excel in school while boys are thought to be rowdy, fidgety, and uninterested (Gurian and Stevens).

Girls have stronger connections between both lobes of the brain, resulting in more communication between left and right brain. Girls also have stronger neural connectors resulting in a more memory storage that is more sense-associated. More memory storage in general is another characteristic of a girl’s brain, as well as a more active prefrontal cortex which keeps girls from making impulsive decisions, as opposed to their male counterpart.

“The female brain tends to drive itself toward stimulants—like reading and writing—that involve complex texture, tonality, and mental activity” (Gurian and Stevens). Girls also use cortical areas of the brain for more emotive and verbal functioning. “With more cortical areas devoted to verbal functioning, sensual memory, sitting still, listening, tonality, and mental cross talk, the complexities of reading and writing come easier, on the whole, to the female brain” (Gurian and Stevens).

According to Leonard Sax, as infants, girls’ hearing is more sensitive than baby boys’.
“Those differences get larger as kids get older. By the age of 12, the average girl has a sense of hearing at least seven times more sensitive than the average boy” (Sax). Girls get distracted by noise ten times quieter than noise that would distract a boy. Girls prefer to learn in a quiet environment where the main form of teaching is lecture. Because of this, Sax says, “In a coed class, the boys have to sit, because boys jumping up and down will unfairly distract the girls.” The learning style of boys and girls are fairly opposite when it comes to noise level, teaching style, even temperature in the rooms.

Leonard Sax, director of the National Association for Single-sex Public Education (NASSPE), says that most advocates for SSE don’t argue that single-sex education is the best option for every student. “There is a great variation among girls and a great variation among boys and for that reason, choice is a good thing,” says Sax. “One size does not fit all” (qtd. in Novotney). But the options are there, and should be considered by parents of students.
Boys make up two-thirds of learning disabilities, earn 70 percent of D’s and F’s, and 80 percent of high school dropouts are male (Gurian and Stevens). Generally at a younger age, girls tend to excel in school while boys are thought to be rowdy, fidgety, and uninterested (Gurian and Stevens). This may serve to explain why, when placing boys and girls in the same classroom, the boys tend to be labeled the trouble-makers, or given disciplinary referrals as they are unable to sit still like the girls. Their learning patterns differ from those of the girls, and so it may seem that the boys are behind in some subjects for their grade, when in reality they are at the average level for their sex.

Boys’ brains activate more cortical areas for abstract and physical-spatial functions, “such as watching and manipulating objects that move through physical space and understanding abstract mechanical concepts” (Gurian and Stevens). Boys tend to be more comfortable moving things like balls and Frisbees, even their own bodies through space and learn better that way than sitting at a desk and taking notes. Boys’ brains also compartmentalize information, making it harder for them to multi-task and move seamlessly through lessons without a rest state.

“It is predominantly boys who drift off without completing assignments, who stop taking notes and fall asleep during a lecture, or who tap pencils or otherwise fidget in hopes of keeping themselves awake and learning (Gurian and Stevens). This explains why boys don’t tend to perform as well in the classroom, as classrooms are generally more geared towards female learning patterns.
Beyond the Classroom

In addition to being an advantage inside the classroom, single-sex education may have advantages that perpetuate outside of the classroom and come into play for the rest of students’ lives. “Our analyses show that single-sex schools are causally linked with both college entrance exam scores and college-attendance rates for both boys and girls” (“Single-sex V.s Coed: The Evidence).

Studies have shown that attendance is linked with and schools. “Advocates of claim that in the absence likely to explore school cribed to girls. If so, male schools would exhibit toward the humanities and would choose more diverse careers than would their cohorts who graduated from coed schools” (James & Richards).

Attending college and having a career is generally associated with a higher income, a higher quality of life, etc., but in addition, it creates men and women in society who do not subscribe to gender stereotypes, most of which are learned in schools.
Although it would seem that segregation of male and female students may promote or even create gender stereotypes, researchers and scholars have agreed and explained that single-sex education can actually serve to combat gender stereotypes.

Separating genders means that girls get to define femininity for themselves and boys get to define masculinity for themselves without the distraction of worrying about if their likes, tastes or ideas are too similar to those of the opposite sex in their environment. Yates says that “in coed schools, female students still tend to gravitate away from technical classes. Currently, in spite of the fact that more females than males earn college degrees, females are still underrepresented in many math and science fields... Single-sex schools report that female students are less likely to consider science or computer classes ‘boys’ classes’ and therefore stay more engaged.”

Allowing girls and boys to develop their tastes and ideas about certain subjects separately from the pressure of presenting themselves to the opposite gender. “If there are no girls around to ridicule boys participating in these activities [art, theatre, cheerleading] and no need for posturing on the part of boys to disassociate oneself from such ‘girlie’ endeavors, presumably more boys will experiment and become comfortable in these areas’” (Caplice as cited in Hughes).

Separating boys and girls can create an environment where gender stereotypes are not heeded and without the comparison, they are not perpetuated.


James, Abigail & Richards, Herbert. “Escaping Stereotypes: Educational Attitudes of Male Alumni of Single-Sex and Coed Schools”

