The debate about the relative merits and disadvantages of single-sex and co-educational schooling, like the debate about single-sex classes in mixed schools, is long running and shows no sign of abating. Although research on, and reviews of, the benefits of single-sex versus co-educational schooling (mainly secondary level) have been undertaken around the world – most notably Australia, Canada, England, New Zealand, Northern Ireland and USA – the results are equivocal. In other words, we lack consistent, robust evidence about the advantages of one school type over the other. However, one emerging finding is that we can not evaluate the effects of single-sex school on educational achievement in a vacuum, that is, the social and cultural context of the school needs to be taken into account. This resource page looks at the multifaceted arguments, looking at the key issues of: the socio cultural context; academic attainment; curriculum and subject choice; children’s experiences of schooling; and social concerns, including preparation for life beyond school.

**Socio-Cultural Context of Single-Sex Schooling**

Socio-cultural context relates to the country and the...
cultural mores that influence the boundary between the school and the society. There is an emerging pattern in research findings to suggest that when the culture within a school matches that of the families who send their children to the school, the higher the academic success. So, the greater the agreement between school expectations and family expectations the more likely the child is to conform to the school culture and recognise academic expectations. When there is a conflict between school culture and what parents expect of their children then children and young people face challenges in coming to recognise school and academic expectations and accept them. Therefore in strongly gender-segregated societies, for example, with recognisably different social roles for men and women, attending single sex schools reinforces the segregated gender roles in society. This sets up a dilemma for feminist educationalists and raises the wider questions about the purposes of education. Should education maintain the social status quo or change it?

Throughout the history of gender and education, schools have been viewed as important sites for social change and places to foster the development of more equal societies with less oppressive social conditions for women. There are different ways to approach the question about the benefits of single sex schools. Some feminist academics argue that women need to have academic success before they can take up roles in public domains and so influence laws, policies and the conditions of all women within society. According to the first position single sex schools may give girls the edge in academic success because lessons can be designed to tap into girls’ interests and so motivate them specifically in subjects that have masculine connotations such as the sciences. Others argue that schools should be places that model equality and so provide young people with early experiences and knowledge of gender equality, otherwise...
they will reproduce the unequal gender patterns that they encounter outside school in their later lives.

According to the second position, co-educational schooling may be seen as a route towards greater gender equality. However, given that in most societies, gender inequalities are structural, teachers need to have enough gender awareness to prevent gendered inequalities being imperceptibly reproduced through their pedagogic practice. Hence the continuing need for all teachers to develop gender awareness.

**Academic Attainment**

Advocates of single-sex schooling frequently point to school league tables as evidence of the academic superiority of single-sex schools. For example, according to tables compiled by BBC News, nine out of ten of the best-performing secondary schools in England in 2006 were single-sex, and seven of these were girls' schools. Whilst press reports of such patterns may reinforce the perceptions of many parents that single-sex schools are better academically than co-educational schools – particularly for girls – research evidence from around the world suggests a more complex picture.

In order to assess how important the gender of a school’s intake is for academic attainment, it is crucial to compare like with like. In other words, to compare schools that are the same in all regards other than whether they are single-sex or co-educational. In practice, this is impossible to do. Schools differ in a host of ways, including in terms of the pupils' social backgrounds, the past attainment of students who enter the school, the way the school is managed, the school ethos, the skills of the teachers and so on. Whilst researchers can select schools for their studies that are as similar as possible to one another, and attempt to control for certain differences when undertaking their analyses, it is not possible to control for all differences.
Problems of comparing like with like are exacerbated by the fact that single-sex schools are often located in particular sectors of the education system. For example, in England most single-sex schools are in the private sector, and this positioning largely accounts for their high rankings in the performance tables. Similarly, in the USA there are few public single-sex schools, as single-sex schooling was seen to violate, in spirit, Title IX of the Educational Amendments of 1972 (although changes to the legislation in 2006 offer communities more flexibility in terms of single-sex state provision). So, overall, comparing like with like is very difficult, if not impossible, to do.

The weight of evidence generated by researchers who have come closest to being able to compare like with like in terms of school types suggests that there are numerous variables that influence academic attainment, most notably, the social backgrounds and ability levels of the intake. Furthermore, the research suggests that these factors are more influential in terms of examination results than whether or not a school is single-sex.

**Curriculum and Subject Choice**

Views about whether single-sex schooling is advantageous in terms of giving girls and boys equal access to the curriculum have shifted over time. For example, in England in the 1950s and 1960s secondary education was often single-sex, with girls and boys being taught in separate schools, or in one building that was divided into two and had separate entrances. In almost all state schools the curriculum was differentiated by gender, with girls being offered some ‘feminine’ domestic subjects and boys being taught more ‘masculine’ science-based subjects.

The schools’ resources also often differed depending on whether they housed girls or boys: many girls’ schools
lacked laboratory space for science, and boys’ schools were often better resourced. As such, during this time, some feminists argued strongly for co-education, in part, because they thought it would deliver access to a broader range of curriculum areas and resources for girls.

The shift to co-education occurred in England in the late 1960s and 1970s as a largely undiscussed by-product of other changes that were implemented in the education system. Following this change, research in the 1970s and 1980s suggested that co-education was not the solution that some feminists had hoped it would be. Evidence suggested that in many co-educational schools girls were ‘encouraged’ to opt for traditionally feminine subjects while boys were directed towards traditionally masculine subjects.

Even today, despite some initiatives to counter gender stereotyping of subjects, boys/men and girls/women tend to cluster within particular subject areas where they have a choice. For example, Higher Education Statistics Agency data suggest that of all UK students studying physics in Higher Education in 2005/06, only 21 per cent were women.

Ironically, evidence emerged suggesting that contrary to the predictions of feminists in the 1950s and 1960s, there is less gender polarisation of subject choice and subject preferences amongst students who are taught in single-sex schools than those who attend co-educational ones. Some longitudinal research suggests that in single sex schools in the UK more boys opted to study modern language and arts and more girls opted to study science than in mixed schools during the 1960s and 1970s. However, social conditions have changed since the 1970s and these findings must be interpreted with some caution: one cannot assume that the gender intake of the school is the only, or most important, explanation for these patterns.
Experiences of Schooling

Although the current educational climate is one in which academic performance and the acquisition of credentials are emphasised, it is important not to downplay the significance of educational experiences for children. Much small-scale research undertaken in the 1970s and 1980s suggested that girls’ experiences in co-educational schools were problematic in a variety of ways. For example, research suggested that: teachers were more intellectually encouraging to, and demanding of, boys and rewarded girls for good, appropriately ‘feminine’ behaviour; boys dominated in the classroom, both in terms of space and teacher time; sexual harassment of girls by boys in the classroom was not uncommon; and boys’ contributions to classroom discussion were taken more seriously than girls’ contributions.

However, it is important to note that not all boys dominate classroom space and not all girls are quiet, and research conducted more recently tends to be more attentive than work conducted in the 1970s and 1980s to differences within gender groups, as well as between them. Nevertheless, although factors such as social class, ‘race’ and ethnicity can be as important as gender for shaping how young people experience schooling, evidence suggests that the gendered patterns of behaviour identified in the 1970s and 1980s persist in co-educational schools today. Of course, this does not mean that single-sex schools offer wholly positive experiences for all children, and this is an area that would benefit from more research.

Social Concerns

There is very little research on the long-term social consequences of single-sex and co-educational schooling. Nevertheless, many advocates of co-education argue that mixed schools are essential so that girls and...
boys can learn to live and work together. In general, their argument is that schools should reflect ‘real’ life (presumably out-of-school life), and as society is mixed, schools should also be mixed.

Some advocates of girls’ schools, on the other hand, argue the opposite. They suggest that the fact that girls’ schools do not mirror ‘real life’ is a key reason to have them. They argue that generally, western societies are male-dominated and women are frequently second place to men in terms of, amongst other things, opportunities, pay and power. So students and teachers need to challenge and change these inequalities rather than reproduce them in schools. Proponents of this argument suggest that single-sex schools can be spaces where girls can begin to challenge male dominance and power, where girls can learn that they do not have to take second place to boys, that they can work free from harassment and taunts, and that they can do science.

The little empirical evidence that exists regarding the long-term social consequences of single-sex and mixed schooling reveals no consistent differences in the personal development of girls and boys in these school types. Evidence suggests, for example, there are no significant differences between students who attend single-sex schools and students who attend co-educational schools in terms of how easy or difficult they find it to adjust socially to university life. Overall though, this is yet another area where we have more unanswered than answered questions.

**Useful Links**

Watch a video of [Carolyn Jackson talking about single-sex versus co-education](#).

Reports of an ESRC study by Diana Leonard (2006) on [Single-sex and co-educational secondary schooling: life course consequences](#).
Further Reading


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