

# STRUGGLING GIRLS

## *Single-Gender Education*

*A* may be the  
*Answer*



A survey of over 1,000 young alumnae of all-girls schools supports the finding that women recognize socio-emotional benefits of their education. These graduates reported that among other things their school contributed to self-confidence, gave them leadership opportunities, prepared them for the transition to college, and supported their individual personal development.

For a copy of this research, visit [http://www.ncgs.org/public\\_pdf/2005\\_NCGS\\_Young\\_Alumnae\\_Survey.pdf](http://www.ncgs.org/public_pdf/2005_NCGS_Young_Alumnae_Survey.pdf)

**by Mystique Williams, B.S., M.A.**

“Could single-sex education be ‘the answer’? Does it work? And is it even constitutional?” Are just some of the questions being asked by educators, parents and political pundits lately.

In the 1990s, parents and educators expressed concern that girls were falling behind in the classroom. Recently, *BusinessWeek* warned readers that there is a “new gender gap” as boys are now in educational trouble. This continuing controversy has led to much interesting and important research on the benefits of single-sex education.

While studies show the positive effects of single-gender education for both boys and girls, the model seems to benefit female students most. The findings indicate a particular benefit regarding socio-emotional and academic gains.

### **Socio-emotional**

There is something about adding boys to the educational mix that turns many girls into passive learners. According to a recent study, girls in coed classes speak up less often, interact less with teachers,

lack participation and are more likely to be harassed by other students than girls in a single-sex class (Parker, & Rennie, 2002).

Take boys out of the picture, and girls are more likely to take risks they would have been too shy to take in mixed company — like speaking up in class even when they aren't sure of the answer or participating in athletics without worrying about appearing unfeminine. Increasingly diverse role models and opportunities are available for girls to practice leadership in an all-female setting where the principal, math teacher, best athlete and student body president are girls and women.

Single-sex schools are also associated with benefits in self-esteem. A study by Granleese and Joseph finds the single best predictor of self-esteem in coed schools was physical appearance. This was not the case for girls in single-sex schools where self-esteem was more likely to be based on academic confidence (Granleese & Joseph, 1993). Studies assert that this increased self-esteem in all-girl settings may be due to higher cognitive self-worth and more freedom and comfort in behaviors (Smith, 1996). Researcher Cary Watson puts it succinctly, "Clearly, girls in single-sex schools exhibit a belief in their talent and potential that is measurable" (Watson, 2002).

Several studies suggest girls prefer a single-sex school or classroom over a coed environment. A four-year study of single-sex classes led to the discovery that teens of both sexes prefer the segregation, work harder and perform better on exams than they did in mixed-sex classes. Girls in particular said they felt less inhibited in the more relaxed atmosphere of a single-sex class (Martin, 2001).

### Academic

Girls' schools elicit consistently positive effects on attitudes toward academics. Studies suggest that girls in a single-sex environment focus on academics rather than the often negative peer culture of a coeducational environment. The peer culture in many coeducational schools focuses on dating relationships, socializing and acquiring status symbols. It is not always "cool" to make good grades or be involved in extra-curricular activities. The culture of a single-sex school is such that academics come to the forefront. Girls from single-gender schools are more likely to choose academically-oriented friends rather than friends who are interested in socializing and partying (Lee & Byrk, 1986).

Another finding states that girls — at every age and in every country studied — in single-sex schools and classrooms are more likely to explore subjects that are traditionally thought of as "male" classes, including computer science, math, and physics.

Professor of Education at University of Michigan Dr. Valerie Lee studied single-sex and coed Catholic schools and found consistently positive results for girls in attitudes toward academics, course enrollment patterns, achievement and educational aspirations (Lee, 1998). A transition would be useful to connect the ideas. Marlene Hamilton's classic study in Jamaica found that girls in single-sex schools did better academically and outperformed boys in almost every subject tested, while girls at coeducational

schools performed worse than boys at single-sex or boys in coeducational schools (Hamilton, 1985).

A British study began by assigning students to either single-sex or coed classrooms; the study concluded with a standardized test of language skills. Forty-eight percent of the girls assigned to the coed classrooms passed the test, while 89 percent of their peers in the single-sex classroom passed the test (Henry, June 2001). Another study found that girls' performance in math and science increased in single-sex classrooms (Younger, et al., 2005).

Presque Isle High School in Maine noticed that its girls were scoring significantly lower on Algebra tests. By establishing an all-girls learning unit they decreased the gap from 72 to 16 points difference. Principal Richard Durost said of the single-sex class, "While we encourage all teachers to accommodate students' different learning styles, the boys' aggressive learning styles often interfered with the girls' preferred styles" (Newquist, 1997).

Additionally, girls who attend single-sex schools may even increase their future earning potential (Sullivan, 2006). Other researchers point out that girls from single-sex schools choose careers with greater prestige than girls who attended coeducational schools (Lawrie & Brown, 1992).

### Other Factors That May Play a Role in the Success of Girls in Single-Sex Schools

Though there are abundant positive findings for girls' schools, it is fair to question whether benefits are simply due to the removal of males, or if there are other factors at work.

Some researchers argue that socioeconomic level has more to do with explaining why girls in single sex schools, which are often private, fare better than those in sexually-integrated schools, which tend to be public. In his studies of Catholic schools, Cornelius Riordan, a leading educational researcher and professor of Sociology, posits that underprivileged youth actually benefit more from a single-sex environment than their upper-class peers. His studies show that girls who attend Catholic single-sex schools tend to be from a lower socioeconomic status, but still outperform girls in coed schools (Riordan, (1998). Parent choice and commitment, along with peer quality, may play a role in these findings.

In a study controlled to limit the influence of prior academic ability and other background factors, the National Foundation for Educational Research found that girls at all levels of academic ability and past performance did better in single-sex schools than coed schools (Spielhofer, et al., 2002).

From the moment you step through the door, a visit to an all-girls school produces a "feel" that is different from other schools. At these institutions of learning you



continued on page 22

**There is something about adding boys to the educational mix that turns many girls into passive learners.**



find a strong camaraderie among students, a sense of belonging, parent commitment, and a high level of student enthusiasm and involvement. Most perceptible, though, is the small class size and the personal commitment of staff and teachers that the size allows.

With all these factors at work it is difficult, if not impossible to tell if there is a single ingredient that makes girls schools and their students successful. It may not be enough simply to put boys and girls into separate classes or schools, though that change alone has been shown to help. The overall success is likely due to a combination of factors, but further educational studies and time may reveal a clearer answer.

### Single-Sex Treatment Programs

The studies presented here pertain to “typical” schools. In other words, schools not specifically designed to work with youth experiencing behavioral and emotional problems. These findings beg many questions of professionals in the adolescent behavioral treatment community: Can what we know about single sex-schools make the case for single-sex treatment programs and special schools? Can the increased comfort level provided by single-sex schools help girls more honestly express themselves in the treatment environment? Will the academic, rather than peer culture focus of the single-sex school translate to the single-sex treatment program? Sufficient research does not yet exist on the subject, but a few common scenarios can be considered.

The distraction of the opposite sex in a classroom may be insignificant for adolescents who are emotionally stable and who are able to make “good” choices. However, imagine how the presence of the opposite sex might affect a highly impulsive child who has trouble managing her anger, has begun to experiment with drugs and whose ‘obsession’ with a boyfriend led her down a self-destructive path. The depressed young lady who is rebelling against her parents by drinking and engaging in sexual promiscuity should be considered as well. These are common profiles for young people in behavioral treatment programs — young people who may fare better when they are not tempted to impress, seduce, or harass the opposite sex while they work on healing themselves and their families.

Nancy Coulbourn Ike, M.Ed., a Certified Educational Planner and member of IECA (Independent Educational Consultants Association) has years of experience helping families find treatment programs and schools for their troubled children.

“I confess that I hold a bias toward single-sex education for many girls,” said Ike. “When the education involves mental health treatment, I feel even stronger about this model. A young woman trying to overcome problems, be they depression, substance abuse, eating disorders or oppositionality, needs to focus on that problem exclusively. The distraction of the opposite sex reduces therapeutic impact and dilutes the goal of promoting self-esteem, introspection and independence.”

Taking troubled children out of coeducational environments may allow them to gain maturity and self-esteem that will help them retain their identities in later relationships. In a single-sex treatment setting girls may have more freedom to express themselves, participate fully in activities like ropes courses, and work through gender-sensitive issues like sexual abuse or poor boundaries with males. Furthermore, with treatment programs costing upwards of \$100 per day, it is prudent to utilize as much time as possible to focus on treatment and education, not on who likes whom and other interference.

Some parents and professionals are concerned that it is not natural for boys and girls to be kept apart. They worry about stunted social growth and missed opportunities.

When the stakes are high, as they are for young ladies with behavioral and emotional problems, no one wants to settle for less than the best treatment and education. Professionals in the industry can only work from information yielded from current educational research and at times, trial and error. For now, all-female environments seem to be the best hope for providing girls with tools to be socially, emotionally, and academically successful. ▼

**Mystique Williams** is a Referral Counselor for Three Springs, Inc. She received her B.S. in Human Development and Family Studies from the University of Alabama and her M.A. in Counseling from Liberty University. She may be contacted at 1(888)758-4356 or [mystique.williams@threesprings.com](mailto:mystique.williams@threesprings.com).

### References

- Granleese, J. & Joseph, S. (1993). Self-perception profile of adolescent girls in a single-sex and mixed-sex school. [Electronic Version]. *The Journal of Genetic Psychology*, 60, 210. Hamilton, M. (1985). Performance levels in science and other subjects for Jamaican adolescents attending single-sex and coeducational high schools. *International Science Education*, 69, 535-547.
- Henry, J. (2001, June 1). Help for the boys helps the girls. *Times Educational Supplement* (London).
- Lawrie, L. & Brown, R. (1992) Sex stereotypes, school subject preferences, and career aspirations as a function of single/mixed-sex schooling and presence/absence of an opposite sex sibling. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 62, 132-138.
- Lee, V.E. (1998). Is single-sex secondary schooling a solution to the problem of gender inequity? [Electronic Version]. In American Association of University Women Educational Foundation (Eds.), *Separated by sex: A critical look at single-sex education for girls*. (pp. 41-52). Washington DC: American Association of University Women Educational Foundation.
- Lee, V.E. & Byrk, A. (1986). Effects of single-sex secondary schools on student achievement and attitudes. [Electronic Version]. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 78, 5.
- Martin, M. (2001, July). Single sex classes in english trial in year 9, 1997-2001. [Electronic Version]. Comberton Village College: Schools University Partnership for Education Research.
- Newquist, C. (1997). The yin and yang of learning: Educators seek solutions in single-sex education. *Education World*. Retrieved July 2, 2007, from [http://www.educationworld.com/a\\_curr/curr024.shtml](http://www.educationworld.com/a_curr/curr024.shtml).
- Parker, L.H. & Rennie, L.J. (2002). Teachers' implementation of gender-inclusive instructional strategies in single-sex and mixed-sex science classrooms. [Electronic Version]. *International Journal of Science Education*, 24, (881-897).
- Riordan, C. (1998). The future of single-sex schools. [Electronic Version]. In American Association of University Women Educational Foundation (Eds.), *Separated by sex: A critical look at single-sex education for girls*. (pp. 53-62). Washington DC: American Association of University Women Educational Foundation.
- Spielhofer, T., O'Donnell, L., Benton, T., Schagen, S. & Schagen, I., (2002). The impact of school size and single-sex education on performance (LGA research report 33). England. National Foundation for Educational Research.
- Smith, I. (1996, August). The impact of schooling on student self-concepts and achievement. [paper presented]. Biennial meeting of the International Society of the Study of Behavioral Development.
- Sullivan, A. (2006, August). Single-sex and co-educational schooling: lifecourse consequences? [Electronic Version]. Centre for Longitudinal Studies, Institute of Education.
- Younger, M. & Warrington, M. with Gray, J., Ruccuck, J., McLellan, R., Bearne, E, Kershner, R. & Bricheno, P. (RR636). (2005). *Raising Boys' Achievement*. England. University of Cambridge Faculty of Education: Department for Education and Skills.
- Watson, C.M. (2002). Career aspirations of adolescent girls: effects of achievement level, grade, and single-sex school environment. [Electronic Version]. *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research*.