

A Chat with a Passenger about Single-Gender Learning

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Sometimes, when I fly, I find that once the plane is airborne and the 10,000 feet announcement comes over the intercom, my fellow passenger starts to talk to me. I am usually asked, “What do you do?” In the process of explaining that I am a university professor and that I teach, write, and conduct research, I add, “Right now, I am researching single-gender education.” The incredulous response is often, “Really? What does that mean?”

Today, you are one of my fellow passengers. I am going to take you through my on-a-plane conversation about single-gender education. I want to communicate clearly the realities of single-gender research and answer the inevitable questions that come out in an airplane discussion or any other discussion for that matter.

Usually, the first question that my passenger friend wants to know is “**What does single-gender mean?**” I find it is important to distinguish at the onset of the chat the difference between single-gender schools vs. a single-gender classroom. I explain that a single-gender school is a school for all boys or all girls. Most of the audiences to whom I speak have at least a vague awareness of single-gender *schools*. Typically, they are thinking of private schools that have been around for over 100 years. I explain that in today’s educational system in the United States, single-gender programs can be found throughout the country in public school districts and in public or state charter schools. Other single-gender schools are regular public schools in the school district. Some examples are the Young Women’s Leadership School in East Harlem, New York; the Charity Adams Earley Academy for Girls School and the Dayton Boys Prep Academy, both in Dayton, Ohio; the Irma Rangel Young Women’s Leadership School in Dallas, Texas; Pro-Vision, Inc. in Houston, Texas; the Ella P. Stewart Academy for Girls in Toledo, Ohio; and many others.

Single-gender *classrooms* are a novel idea for many of my seat-partners. I try to make the explanation simple: boys and girls attend the same campus, but they have some or all of their classes separated by gender. For example, there is a fourth-grade class for boys; another fourth grade class for girls; and a third fourth-grade class that is coeducational.

My fellow traveler sometimes expresses a concern that single-gender classes may not be the first choice for some parents. Often I hear: “**Suppose a parent does not want her or his child enrolled in a single-gender class?**” I explain that parents always have a choice. “Choice” means that if a public school offers the option of single-gender classrooms, parents must, by law, have a choice regarding whether or not their child will be enrolled in a single-gender classroom or in a mixed classroom (boys and girls).

It is essential that parents hear all sides of the story – the good, the bad, and the uncertain regarding single-gender learning arrangements. There have been occasions when school personnel have not informed the parents of single-gender classroom enrollments until the second day of school. There have been occasions, too, where parents have asked to have their child taken out of a single-gender classroom and this request was not

honored. Failing to honor such a request is illegal; it is also just plain silly. The school leadership should explain to parents what children might benefit from the single-gender format, and which children might NOT benefit.

Usually, the next question is, **“What is the best grade level to start a single-gender classroom?”** The most common response is that the best grade level to start a single-gender classroom is at the middle school. This is when girls notice boys and boys notice girls. Many successful single-gender programs have started with younger students, even in kindergarten and first grade, and then “roll-out” this model to higher grades in the following years.

The most difficult level to start single-gender classroom learning arrangements is at high school. The main issue is student attitude. Setting up a new learning arrangement when boys and girls have been together for many years may lead to resentment about gender separation. Sometimes, there are logistical issues like scheduling. It may be difficult to schedule single-gender classrooms because of the complexity of multiple levels of subjects and electives. Of course, there are ways to assist in scheduling by setting up a learning arrangement within the school – a single-gender academy or a school-within-a-school, for example.

Do single-gender classrooms violate federal or state education laws? No, provided that the school (faculty, administration and staff) can offer a rationale, ensure that there is a coeducational class in the same subject (at a geographically accessible place), and that there is a review every two years to determine whether the rationale is still valid. The requirements for charter schools are different; more information on this point is available at www.singlesexschools.org/policy-legalstatus.htm.

How do I know that the single-gender classroom will not be a place to “dump” all the boys or girls who have discipline problems or special needs? These are questions that school administrators should answer honestly. A single-gender classroom should reflect the diversity of the school respecting academic achievement, racial/ethnic demographics, language, and special needs. Balance and diversity in the classroom are essential to maintain equity and equality in learning.

Does this arrangement allow boys to act out more? An essential component of a single-gender classroom is teacher training. Putting boys in one classroom and girls in another classroom without providing some training for these teachers can be a recipe for disaster. Some schools have seen a rise in discipline referrals after adopting the single-gender format, particularly for boys, especially when the teacher has not received training in best practice for leading an all-boys’ classroom. On the other hand, some schools that maintain a consistent database on classroom infractions and have systematic training for single-gender learning in place have found that discipline referrals have decreased in the all-boys classroom as compared to the level of boys’ discipline referrals in a mixed classroom (Riordan, 2002).

Do you have to have state permission or is it a local decision? The decision to implement single-gender classrooms is a local decision. Starting a single-gender learning arrangement may originate from a school principal or committee but it is important that all constituents in the school district have a voice in the final decision, including the school board, the teachers’ union, and parents. This helps the community stay informed about the true purpose of single-gender learning.

What are the advantages of single-gender education for girls? The advantages of single-gender education for girls helps expanded their educational opportunities, custom-tailors their learning and instruction, and provides them with greater autonomy, especially in heterosexual relationships (Bruce & Sanders, 2002, NASSPE, 2010). Arguably, the single greatest benefit of girls-only education is the greater breadth of educational opportunity and the finding that many girls score higher on their final academic scores from an all girls’ school as compared to a girl who attended a traditional high school (Sugden, 2009). Additional research can be found in Leonard Sax’s 2010 book *Girls on the Edge: The four factors driving the new crisis for girls*; see Chapter 5 for an extensive reference section on this topic.

At every age, girls in girl-only classrooms are more likely to explore "non-traditional" subjects such as computer science, physics (or the primary school precursors to the physical sciences), woodworking, etc. A nationwide report from UCLA’s Graduate School of Education & Information Studies provides evidence that graduates of girls’ schools report higher levels of self-confidence, engagement and ambition compared to their coed peers; they also report that they have more confidence in mathematics and computer abilities and are more

likely to engage in political discussion, keep current with political affairs, and see college as a stepping stone to graduate school (Sax, Arms, Woodruff, Riggers, and Eagan, 2009, pp. 334-35; 338-43).

What are the advantages of single-gender education for boys? The number of boys disengaging from school is on the rise (Sax, 2007). This picture continues in college where the percentage of girls enrolled as compared to males is 3:1. What researchers (e.g. Ferrara, 2006) are finding is that boys tend to be more engaged in all-boy classrooms where teachers use strategies that are aligned with the learning styles of boys – more movement, timed-activities, and quick-paced. While researchers have provided limited research to substantiate how to “turn on boys,” Sax (2007) suggests that the all-boys format creates the opportunity to establish an “alternative culture” in which it is cool to be a scholar. The reality is that only a few schools have taken advantage of this opportunity. A University of Virginia study with follow-up evidence showed that boys who attended single-gender schools were more than twice as likely to pursue interests in subjects such as art, music, drama, and foreign languages, compared to boys of comparable ability who attended coed schools (Norfleet & Richards, 2003). Furthermore, James reports in her book, *Teaching the Male Brain*, that boys tend to grasp art more effectively if they draw from a mechanical perspective (p. 158), ironically, a perspective gained from a male art teacher.

Do teachers need special training to teach in a single-gender classroom? The first point to remember, when you consider evidence regarding the effectiveness of gender-separate classrooms, is this: simply putting girls in one room and boys in another is no guarantee that effective teaching and learning will take place. When this happens (and sadly, this happens often), effective teaching and learning do not take place. When all teachers in a school receive meaningful professional development about single-gender learning over a sustained period of time – that is before the learning arrangement is in place and during the school year as well, then the results are consistently positive in terms of student learning (e.g., Ferrara, 2008).

Should men teach in the all-boy classroom and women in the all-female classroom? There is no comprehensive empirical evidence that a male teacher is more effective in an all-male classroom as compared to a female teacher. This is also true with female teachers in an all-female classroom.

I have developed a teaching style inventory that explores teaching styles that create a possible “fit” for boys and for girls’ learning styles (Ferrara, 2009). In my analysis of 490 surveys from 13 different schools, when teachers were asked to identify their teaching preferences – all boys, all girls, or mixed – 245 teachers (50%) chose mixed gender; 129 chose all-boys (26%); and 116 (24%) indicated all-girls as their preference. Among 100 male teachers, 57 (57%) selected mixed classrooms, 25 (25%) boys, and 18 (18%), girls. Among 390 female teachers in the study, 188 (48%) selected mixed; 104 (27%) boys, and 98 (25%) girls. In a follow-up question, when teachers were asked to predict how their teaching style inventory would turn out, most predicted they would be a best fit in a mixed-gender classroom. When asked why they predicted this, many teachers responded that they were taught to differentiate their instruction in order to reach all students. These teachers seem to have regarded gender differences in learning as no different from other differences in learning style, e.g., haptic versus kinesthetic. It is regrettable that in teacher preparation courses, professors seldom address gender differences in learning.

As teachers gain more insights about their personal teaching styles and their students’ various learning styles, they report that they are able to make adjustments in their teaching practices and styles. This may affect their preference about which classroom they believe they have a best fit.

Is the single-gender separation of boys and girls artificial? Does that interfere with how they learn to get along in real life? In a mixed-gender learning arrangement, gender identification is more apparent, a phenomenon called “gender intensification” (Martin & Ruble, 2010). That means that when girls and boys are together, they may become more mindful of what the prevailing culture says is appropriate for girls and what is appropriate for boys. As a result, a coed format often has the unintended consequence of intensifying gender roles, despite the most enlightened leadership and teaching. Our culture is a sexist culture - and the culture of children and adolescents is even more sexist than the adult culture. More information on this point is available at <http://www.singlesexschools.org/research-forgirls.htm>. We learn by what others say about what is appropriate for girls and by what makes girls “geeks” because they enjoy studying physics and engineering. Boys are “nerds” if they select art and glee club. You, as the adult, can try to tell them otherwise, but in the coed

format, stereotyped notions of what is “girly” and what is “manly” often prevail. The single-gender format, with the right kind of leadership, offers a great opportunity to break down those gender stereotypes. Being in single-gender classes brings out another point; it seems that students are more confident and willing to be an active part of the class.

David Chadwell, the Education Associate of all the single-gender learning arrangements in South Carolina writes, “I am starting to see - from talking to parents, teachers, and students - that this effect continues after they leave the single-gender environment ... including 6th graders who return to a coed middle school, 9th graders after middle school experiences in single-gender classes and 10th graders after a 9th grade experience. These boys and girls with a single-gender classroom learning experience background when they return to a coed environment seem to be more mature, focused on academics, and better behaved” (Chadwell, n.d.)

So, do single-gender classes really work? In today’s schools, administrators and their teachers are searching for “what works” to increase student achievement scores. Single-gender classrooms seem to provide a structure for innovation. To ensure that single-gender classes provide meaningful gains in academic achievement and are not just another educational fad, the single-gender program must be in effect for at least three years. This time frame allows for collection and analysis of meaningful data. Unfortunately, data are often not collected and analyzed in a systematic way. Without systematic analysis, it’s difficult or impossible to say with confidence whether the single-gender format is the key variable responsible for any changes in the students’ academic achievement.

Secondly, although the research shows mixed findings, it appears that students from affluent backgrounds learn more (academically) in a single-gender learning arrangement (Whitmore and Bailey, 2010). Other researchers have found that single-gender schools are effective in boosting academic achievement, especially for students from low-income and working –class parents, most particularly for African-Americans and Hispanic students. For example, 100% of the graduating seniors at Urban Prep, a high school for all Black males on the South Side of Chicago, will be attending 4-year colleges or universities this fall (<http://www.urbanprep.org/>).

Single-gender environments can provide nourishing atmospheres for learning social behaviors and skills that enhance learning. Single-gender classrooms can provide an environment for no-excuses learning coupled with strong teaching of behaviors and attitudes that students need for success in school.

We are landing. I feel confident that my chat with my seat-partner passenger was enlightening. Who is to know? Maybe, this person who can help spread the word about single-gender learning in the future.

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<http://www.city-data.com/school/charity-adams-earley-academy-for-girls-oh.html>

Dayton Boys Prep in Dayton, Ohio

<http://www.dps.k12.oh.us/schools/elementary/dayton-boys-prep.html>

Irma Rangel Young Women's Leadership School in Dallas, Texas

http://www.feyw.org/feyw/do/forward/what_we_do/our_schools

Pro-Vision, Inc. in Houston, Texas

<http://www.provision-inc.org/about.html>

Stewart Academy for Girls in Toledo, Ohio

<http://www.tps.org/ella-p-stewart-academy-for-girls.html>

Young Women's Leadership School in East Harlem, New York

<http://www.tywls.org>

Urban Prep Academies in Chicago, Illinois

<http://www.urbanprep.org/>