

Why girls' schools are streets ahead of co-ed – Daily Telegraph opinion piece

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WITH so much uncertainty about the future of work and the skills our children will need for career and life success. How do we ensure they reach their potential and are prepared for the world after school?

Proponents of coeducation argue that our world and specifically our workplaces are mixed gender, therefore, our schools too should be mixed gender. But the reality for women is that our world and workplaces, while mixed gender, are a long way from being gender-equal.

Research into gender bias shows that girls as young as four years old perceive themselves to be less powerful than boys, and by the age of five, children are well on their way to learning gender stereotypes.

In high school girls are more likely to view their maths ability as “below average” and there’s a significant difference between girls’ and boys’ subject choices with fewer girls participating in STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) and fewer boys taking creative and humanities subjects. Once in the workplace women are not represented equally in senior leadership roles, they earn on average 19 per cent less than their male counterparts and are impacted more by childcare responsibilities and caring for aged parents.

One of the major hurdles to boosting the number of women in senior leadership positions and STEM careers is giving girls the motivation, self-belief and resilience to disrupt gender bias. This is happening in girls’ schools where girls are more likely to reject gender stereotypes and are bucking the trend when it comes to studying STEM subjects.

Girls’ schools are sending their students on to study business, law and STEM degrees in record numbers — it is these areas that are touted as the lifeblood of emerging knowledge-based industries and jobs of the future.

Studies have shown that a girl's environment plays an important role in explaining why she chooses to get involved and compete at school. Girls from single-sex schools behave more competitively than do coeducational girls, they are more assertive, willing to take risks, ask questions, make mistakes, and participate at higher levels in sport and physical education — skills that are advantageous for leadership and life success.

Vitaly, girls' schools provide a safe space for girls to learn to combat the gender bias and sexism that still exist within universities, workplaces and our broader communities — so that when girls leave school they know they are absolutely equal to their male peers and will accept nothing less. Girls too are increasingly subjected to unrelenting pressure from traditional and social media over body image. They are often the victims of unwanted sexting, sexual harassment and exposure to pornography.

The rise in anxiety, depression and self-harm in girls and young women in Australia is a major concern with a 2016 Mission Australia report finding that nearly 30 per cent exhibited symptoms of a serious mental illness. As specialists in girls, girls' schools are uniquely focused on supporting students through these complex and difficult issues.

In contrast to co-ed schools, single-sex schools can tailor every aspect of teaching and learning to meet the needs of the girls or boys in their care. Many co-ed schools are trying to replicate the benefits of single-sex schooling with the introduction of single-sex classes, but single-sex classes only go part of the way and don't address many of the social agonies and unconscious bias of a co-ed campus.

At a student leadership conference earlier this year the girls told a familiar story — their all-girls school is a place where they can be themselves, feel supported and confident. As one Year 12 student put it: "You're able to be more open ... everyone has an equal chance to speak up and be heard" and another "before I came to an all-girls school I was almost lost in the classroom ... now academically I get a lot more out of it".

And on boys: "there's plenty of opportunities to socialise with boys outside of school, we see boys everywhere, but at school my focus is on learning".

In some countries, most notably the US, single-sex education is in favour and on the rise. However, recently in Australia five well-known boys' schools announced that they would move to coeducation. Yet since 2000, only one prominent girls' school has converted to co-ed.

Dig behind the rhetoric used to explain the decision of boys' schools to change to co-ed and the driver is usually enrolment numbers, not students' (and definitely not girls') academic, social and emotional wellbeing.

Some research points to coeducational schooling having some benefits for boys, but there is no evidence to suggest that girls do better academically in a co-ed environment. Fundamentally girls do better at girls' schools, not just academically but in terms of their confidence and approach to challenges, risks and leadership.

If we want fearless, strong girls who choose their own path and challenge gender bias and stereotypes then girls' schools are able to provide the foundation.

Loren Bridge is the Executive Officer of the Alliance of Girls' Schools Australasia (AGSA). Before joining AGSA, Loren worked in both co-ed and single-sex learning environments and has a keen interest in women's empowerment and gender equality.