
Boys and single-sex schooling

By Ian Lillico

Two of the most commonly asked questions I get from parents is: Where should I send my son for his secondary schooling – a boys' school or a Co-Ed school?" and "Are single - sex classes in a Co-Ed school useful for boys?" These are complex questions but I want to share with you some aspects of international research on the topic.

Canadian research at the OISE (Ontario Institute for Studies in Education) whilst I was there in 2000 during my Churchill Fellowship year in 2000 have concluded that, given the latest findings into how boys learn and what makes them interested in schooling, boys-only schools have the edge and/or boys in single-sex classes in a Co-Ed school outperforming those in co-ed classes. This is now backed up by Australian research from ACER and other sources. We went through an era when it was considered unhealthy to have boys in an all-male environment in terms of their social and emotional growth. This has since been shown to be untrue and many boys' schools have witnessed a marked increase in enrolments over the last few years worldwide and here in Australia.

William Pollack's research in his book "Real Boys" has revealed that boys in an all boys environment are easier on each other without girls – particularly in the early High School years. The significance before and after this period is not as marked – puberty years seem to be the impressionable ones. However boys' schools are now employing many more women teachers and this has had a marked impact in softening harsh school environments and helping boys develop their emotional intelligence, which they often get from their mothers and female teachers more than from their male influences. Still, the most important ingredient in the success of a single-sex class within a Co-Ed school is the teacher and Australian boys indicate that the gender of the teacher is not as important as the relationship that exists between the boy and his teacher.

As boys' schools are now using less punitive discipline systems and the cane has gone, these schools are now less threatening for boys in an all – boys environment. The only remaining influence is the domination of sport in boys' schools. Many schools have diversified their offerings but some schools continue to value sporting prowess above all else. In these schools boys who are not good at sport are marginalised by their peers and often teased and bullied. Thus boys who are good at sport do well in all boys' schools, but other talented boys are often overlooked. Most boys' schools are working hard to change this situation and are succeeding, but the old school tie is an inhibiting factor.

Boys' only schools are particularly good for boys who are well coordinated and good at the Arts – Music, Drama, Dance, Art and Choir. In many Co-Ed schools these same boys are bullied and made to feel different by their peers. Many boys do not fulfil their marvellous talents in such schools, but many Co-Ed schools are overtly tackling the school culture and peer group pressure to improve this situation.

Choosing a Secondary School for your son is one of the most significant decisions parents make in their boy's life as you are really choosing a peer group as well. Ensure you know what the school really values, the system it employs for pastoral care and the relationships that are developed between staff and students.

I have tried to summarise the main issues with respect to boys' vs co-ed schools but parents need to match their son with the school. There are many

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complex variables. Finally all – boys' classes within a Co-Ed school are most useful when there is a significant difference between boys and girls results in a particular subject and the teacher is very tuned in to boys and their learning styles. To create such a class without these considerations will not necessarily see significant gains in boys' results and boundaries, rules and no put downs have to be a major part of this strategy. Please spend a lot of time researching your son's future High School and allow him an out if he is unhappy as this could spell disaster for his entire Secondary schooling. Good luck in these difficult decisions.