

Separated by Sex: A Critical Look at Single-Sex Education for Girls

Susan Morse, Ed. The American Association of University Women Educational Foundation: Washington, DC, 1998. 99 pp. ISBN 1879922169. \$12.95.

The findings of the recently released report *Separated by Sex: A Critical Look at Single-Sex Education for Girls* published by The American Association of University Women (AAUW) have obtained much press, but most of it does not accurately reflect the actual round-table papers contained within the report. This important report summarizes the research on single-sex education, an ever-present but long-ignored segment of our educational system, which the report suggests has much worth modeling. Contrary to what has been written in the press, the four round-table papers in the report present research showing that single-sex schools give definite educational advantages to at least some subgroups of the students who attend them. In addition, most of the girls' schools studied were Catholic schools, and viewed from another perspective, these studies reveal the important role Catholic girls' schools play in American society. The study also suggests that the advantages of single-sex schools may be present in single-sex classes established in some public schools, but definitive research data are not yet available.

The pervasive negative view of single-sex education associated with the report stems from research summarized in its literature review, which suggests that single-sex schools offer no long-term gains in educational achievement; but there are just as many studies which draw the opposite conclusion, so the debate is far from over. Indeed, a summary of the research conclusions involves the difficult task of summarizing contradictory results.

The quickly released short newspaper articles may not accurately reflect the contents of the 99-page report because of the misleading press release that accompanied the report. This states that the research concludes that "There is no evidence *in general* that single-sex education works or is better for girls than coeducation." The phrase "in general" is in italics in the press release for good reason. The report does discuss the positive consequences of single-sex education for the subgroups of students who are or have been traditionally disadvantaged—minorities, low- and working-class youth, and females who are not affluent.

Thus, according to research of Cornelius Riordan discussed in the report, single-sex schools, for those disadvantaged girls who have the will and can obtain the means necessary to attend them, are a medium through which lives can be changed. The positive effects of single-sex schools are greatest among black and Hispanic females from low socioeconomic levels. This is the very target group of innumerable social welfare programs aimed at reducing teen pregnancy and cyclical poverty. This very important report tells us that single-sex schools are a way to reach disadvantaged girls and to break the cycle of poverty prevalent in American society. As Riordan states, "Notwithstanding other gains or losses that may result, single-sex schools provide an atmosphere that 'empowers' African and Hispanic American students" (p 59).

While the round-table paper of Patricia Campbell and Ellen Wahl points out causes of differences other than gender in single-sex schools—for example, differing teachers' styles and expectations—a perfectly controlled study will rarely be possible. This is because there will be different students with some degree of self-selection and different teachers, also self-selected to some extent. In my view, it is counterproductive to reserve drawing conclusions in hope of a more perfectly controlled study because past research outlines interesting and important trends from single-sex education, even though the studies are imperfect. Surely one can still learn qualitative lessons from the studies in their current forms.

Because the majority of girls' schools studied were American Catholic girls' schools, this report also reveals the important role that these religious schools play in American society. While also educating other groups, these single-sex Catholic schools aid the disadvantaged and, in many cases give them the educational advantages generally restricted to those of higher socioeconomic status. According to the report, the Catholic girls' schools are ironically acting as the "equalizer" in American society, just what the founders of public schools thought a public education would be.

What could be the cause of the successes of Catholic girls' schools among the disadvantaged? Single-sex Catholic schools may represent a "pro-academic" choice by families and by girls who attend them, because the schools differ from the norm in American society, coed public schools. This was pointed out by Cornelius Riordan in his round-table paper. Riordan lists a dozen rationales that may explain why single-sex schools can be more effective academically than coeducational schools, especially for minorities and white females. These include diminished strength of youth culture values, greater degree of order and control, greater number of leadership opportunities, smaller school size, and a core curriculum emphasizing academic subjects taken by all students. Nearly all observers noted a greater degree of order in the single-sex schools. Several studies found that many students prefer single-sex classes. My own speculation is that the greater degree of order in them may be the reason for this preference.

In her round-table report, Valerie Lee noted that there is indirect evidence that girls in single-sex schools are more academically oriented than their counterparts in coed schools. This evidence is suggested from studies comparing girls in single-sex Catholic schools to girls in coed Catholic schools. The Catholic school studies showed that girls' school students had higher educational aspirations, were more likely to plan to go to graduate school, and were headed toward less stereotypically female fields. The studies also found that girls in single-sex Catholic schools did more homework, associated with more academically oriented peers, took more math courses, and had higher achievement in reading and science than their female counterparts in Catholic coed schools (p 49).

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Lee lists some characteristics of “good schools”, which include small school size, students taking mostly academic courses, personal school relations among school members (less bureaucracy), active learning, authentic instruction throughout the school and not just in individual classes, and teachers taking personal responsibility for all their students’ learning. Lee has found that single-sex schools for girls are often characterized by these elements. Smallness is to their advantage, she argues, as many of the organizational properties on the list are easier to accomplish in smaller places.

The research on single-sex classes in public schools is difficult to interpret because of the varied goals of the classes and the different ways in which the classes are implemented, as discussed in Diane Pollard’s round-table report. The explicit way public school classes in some Milwaukee schools were segregated by race and gender caused a national controversy. Initially, all-male “African-American Immersion Schools” were proposed at the elementary and middle school levels, but the gender criterion was withdrawn shortly after it was proposed. However, single-sex after-school classes were studied in one of the two coed African-American Immersion Schools established in 1991 and 1992. Single-sex after-school classes were established so that social and cultural issues could be intertwined with gender issues. Pollard is still in the midst of analyzing the data from these studies. However, she writes that “single sex classes may be particularly helpful to girls at the developmental level of early adolescence”—that is, at the 7th and 8th grade level. Pollard notes that this is the developmental level at which most studies were done and thus this does not preclude single-sex classes from being effective at other levels.

In addition to the round-table papers, the report includes a literature review by Pamela Haag. Poor judgment was used in the choice of literature included. The scope is simply too vast; it should have been limited to studies of students in the United States. Studies conducted in Northern Ireland are inevitably affected by the strife that country experiences, and American readers don’t know enough about the educational systems in Australia, Belgium, Nigeria, and Sweden to be able to judge research conducted there. These studies might be informative in a cross-cultural study of education, but that is not the purpose of the current report. Most significant in the literature review is the summary of a longitudinal study by LePore and Warren (1997) that found “no evidence that single-sex Catholic school boys or girls learn more than their coeducational school peers during high school.” This is contrary to the results of Lee and Bryk (1986), and LePore and Warren suggest that the advantage associated with single-sex schools may have dwindled after reports of gender bias in the 1980s. Is this more recent research more up to date or merely flawed in method or conclusions? Obviously, definitive research has yet to be done.

As Cornelius Riordan states in his round-table paper, “The challenge of effective and equitable schooling in the next century is to overcome the resistance and recalcitrance of youth cultures in and out of school” (p 58). While this is admittedly not a new problem, it is more complex in its modern form and innovative ways to solve it are needed. In an old tradition, one such attempt has been single-sex schools, which have had particular success with the disadvantaged and white females in American society, with the notable involvement of Catholic religious communities. The report does not make clear whether their successes can be reproduced in some modification of the public school format. However, the AAUW report on single-sex schools sheds light on some of the characteristics that make true learning communities out of ordinary schools and on what it takes to reach disadvantaged girls. For these reasons, the AAUW report is good reading for educators at all levels.

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