

The lessons of same-sex schools

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Despite plenty of effort and attention, the gender gap in how our children perform in school hasn't gone away. A recently released Program for International Student Assessment study shows that girls still outstrip boys in reading, and boys continue to score higher in math. On average, Canadian 15-year-old males score 11 points higher than 15-year-old females. Some school boards, parents and educators say the answer lies in introducing single-sex classes. But we believe that while concern about such differences is warranted, policy-makers should be careful about pinning their hopes on such initiatives.

All-boy and all-girl schools are often associated with increasing student achievement, and some people claim that they improve the educational experiences for both genders. No wonder single-sex schooling still commands interest among education professionals, researchers, politicians and parents.

However, we spent the past several months reviewing the academic research on single-sex schooling published between 1990 and 2004, and our findings won't give comfort to those looking to single-sex schooling as a solution to the gender gap in achievement. While many studies examined the possible academic benefit of single-sex environments, few such studies met the criteria of good research.

Most studies compared single-sex private or denominational schools with public coeducational schools, or made comparisons between denominational single-sex and coeducational schools without adequately controlling for differences in socio-economic, parental or motivational background, or the students' prior achievements. And even those studies that attempted to control for existing differences of class, culture and environment by adding statistical controls still weren't able to eliminate the differences among public, private and denominational schools that might have influenced the outcomes.

Even when controls were imposed by statistically equating non-equivalent groups, the results were often overstated -- which is why we argue that the research on single-sex schooling is inconclusive and too tenuous to support a widespread move to single-sex classrooms or schools. However, there's much educators and politicians can do right now, without organizing separate classrooms or schools for boys and girls, that will address the conditions that contribute to differences in achievement.

To start with, schools can bring in policies and practices that ensure equality of opportunity for both boys and girls and eliminate sex discrimination in instruction and the management of student behaviour.

Schools should distribute opportunities and resources more equitably. In too many schools, boys and girls don't have equal access to clubs, courses and athletics. Schools should also ensure that young women who become pregnant can continue their education while caring for their children.

The classroom is an especially important context. Teachers should distribute their attention fairly, giving both boys and girls the chance to participate. Unfortunately, this doesn't always happen: Research shows that teachers give boys attention wherever the boys locate themselves in the classroom, but that girls typically get attention primarily when they are near the teacher.

Similarly unfair patterns have been identified in the distribution of teacher questions to male and female students and in the responses of teachers to the questions asked by boys and girls.

Of course we must continue to be concerned about the gender gap in achievement, the unfair distribution of opportunities, and the differential and unjust treatment of boys and girls in school. Although the evidence doesn't support moving to single-sex instruction as a solution, educators can certainly improve the climate and the teaching strategies in the mixed classrooms we already have.

It's the fair thing to do.

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