

Why choose Co-education?

This statement was edited by Paul Teys following a workshop discussion involving the Heads of Independent Co-educational Schools at their Term 1 Branch meeting held at Tweed Heads, 20 February, 2017.

In co-educational schools, girls and boys, women and men, share in the joy of learning together, developing mutual respect and understanding for each other. Boys and girls working and learning together in natural settings where gender equality and opportunity is promoted, in both academic and co-curricular activities, reflects the most realistic and authentic learning environment.

The ancient Greek philosopher, Plato, advocated co-education, for it promotes “a feeling of comradeship”, of trust, confidence, respect and cooperation. Of course, these qualities still exist in single-sex institutions, but how much more powerful and affirming is the cultivation of these virtues in schools where both boys and girls sit side-by-side.

A discussion about the benefits of co-education needs, to begin with, clarity around purpose. What is the function of education, why do young people spend their formative years in our care, at our schools? What are we educating young people *for*, or *about*, or to *do*? Single-sex institutions have existed for centuries, influenced significantly by tradition and religion. And *purpose*. Particularly for boys, single-sex education traditionally prepared young men for the work they would be required to do upon leaving. There was a focus on skills, as much as knowledge. The opportunities and nature of girls’ education has also dramatically changed in the last hundred years. Schools have become much more than mere conduits for knowledge and skill acquisition.

In the 21st century, schools must work keenly to prepare students for a world beyond their school gates, where the traits of tolerance, respect, initiative, service, resilience and cooperation are as valuable as academic knowledge and skills. If a school’s moral purpose is framed around preparing young people for the changing, diverse, uncertain world they are to inherit, then the educational experience should reflect the diversity and reality of such a world. There is simply too much to be gained from having young people of both genders learning side-by-side over a sustained and extended period of time.

Working together in the classroom and on homework assignments provides boys and girls with the opportunity to learn from each other intellectually, as well as socially. Girls and boys engage collaboratively, exchange ideas and debate issues. Importantly the *presence of both genders* adds to the richness and diversity of thinking and learning that fills all classrooms in all of our schools, a presence that similarly permeates all facets of society.

In co-educational classrooms, enhanced opportunities exist in subjects like English where a broader mix of texts can be considered, chosen and explored. Literature studied in our classrooms invariably portrays characters representative of both genders, through relationships that come into conflict, via authorial purpose and values to be discussed, from the varied perspectives present in the room - through gendered perspectives.

Co-education improves the ways students think, learn and collaborate; children can develop confidence, empathy, understanding and leadership, among both genders, as they navigate the challenges of social and emotional growth, while encouraging success in one another.

Our schools are successful in challenging sexist attitudes. Many subjects allow for considerable classroom discussion and debate; men and women often have different perspectives on the same issues and that each approach has a great deal to offer the other. Patience and respect for alternate views is something to be nurtured, and valued, particularly in today's world.

We've long recognised that women and men work alongside each other more effectively in partnership across all areas of the socio-political landscape, rather than segregated from each other. Co-education is a more natural reflection of society; our schools better reflect the diversity of our culture. Co-educational schools reflect the world that our young men and women will live in.

Outside the classroom, girls and boys stand side-by-side in leadership positions, valuing intellect, initiative and responsibilities in one another. They play sport, often together, and celebrate one another's sporting success. Boys and girls are regularly training together, and our boys are demonstrably supporting their female peers regularly, authentically and naturally from the sidelines, is potent recognition of, and education about the equal status of women's sport. They similarly attend outdoor education camps, collaborate in the performing arts through music ensembles and drama, perform in school productions and share recreational space. They eat together, sing together, worship together, find comfort and support in one another. Co-education encourages boys to be more open to expressing emotion, to exhibit humility and softness. Research also suggests that boys can temper the emotional intensity often evident in girls' educational institutions, and normalise the intensity of girls' peer relationships.

In our school's boys and girls, men and women, work naturally together in clubs and societies, reflecting the real world. Service clubs like Leos (Lions International Youth), Duke of Edinburgh Award programs, leadership programs, and academic activities like mootings, debating and Australian Business Week, to name a few, all provide boys and girls with a natural, authentic setting at school, preparing them for leadership roles in their adult lives.

Friendships develop in a very natural way in co-educational schools. This happens because there are so many activities, societies and clubs in the school in which girls and boys take part in a pleasant, well-supervised environment. Healthy friendships develop between genders through the course of their schooling, because boys and girls share in the triumphs and the disappointments, the humour, the sadness and the challenges of adolescence.

Girls and boys interact with each other as contemporaries in all aspects of everyday school life. In doing so, they build a sound platform for personal growth, peer connectedness, relationships with others and the development of appropriate value systems. Co-education in adolescence helps to moderate and balance the gender specific behaviours.

Co-education provides a more realistic way of shaping young people to take their places naturally in the wider community of men and women. It helps to break down the misconceptions of each sex about the other and provides an excellent foundation for the development of realistic, meaningful and lasting relationships in later life.

Co-educational schools prepare students to succeed in post-Secondary education and to transition to the workforce properly prepared for the social dynamic. Collaboration between girls and boys in the

classroom helps develop confidence in students for their life after school, especially at university, and as the next generation of leaders.

From a practical sense, families can keep their children together in the one school, sharing in those formative experiences collectively, enhancing the value of community and identity, not to mention the significant advantages in efficiencies and practicalities.

International research has *not* been able to show that the arguments about academic performance and gender specific classes are valid; the quality of the teacher in the classroom is the central factor in achievement. Quality teaching matters most, not segregated classrooms.

A couple of years ago when Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau was asked why he desired to have gender parity in his cabinet, with men and women working alongside one another as equals, complementing each other's strengths and shortcomings, he replied simply, "Because it's 2015." The world has changed; the roles and opportunities for both men and women have changed; the traditional currency of single-sex institutions has been devalued, and the agency we wish to give our boys and girls is amplified through inclusion and equality in the every day, not systemic segregation.

Let us not forget, that through education, boys and girls, maturing young women and men, learn not just about curriculum. They also spend nearly 15 years learning *about themselves, learning who they are*. Professor Simon Baron-Cohen, from the University of Cambridge, stresses that "*Separating children for a number of years means they will not be mixing and learning about each other*". One's understanding of self is inherently shaped by the *relationships* formed with those around them and an *awareness* of how they fit into the fabric of their world. With this in mind, co-education promotes a far more authentic understanding of one's self and one's potential to make valuable contributions to society as a respectful, resilient and collaborative adult.

Choose co-education; it is a natural choice.

References

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