



Girls-only schools send a message about boys

Boosters of single-gender classrooms tend to describe boys as loud, aggressive and distracting

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At some point in a little boy's life comes a revelation: girls aren't contagious.

Typically, this happens for us in about Grade 6. The world transforms from a sports-and-toys club to a co-ed realm where boys begin to comb their hair.

Junior high girls inspire in boys a primal sense of wonder and fear. Let me tell you, it is a long and nervous walk across the darkened gymnasium to ask a girl to dance. And it is a lonely and shame-faced return journey if she declines.

I can't imagine what it would have been like if girls had been removed from my wonder years; if the modern movement to same-gender schools was the norm back then.

Edmonton Public Schools has for years run the Nellie McClung junior high program for girls. Now Edmonton's Catholic school board is planning a similar program.

Segregating girls is viewed as a progressive move towards gender equality. Studies show that girls in same-gender schools not only tend to get better marks, but continue to pursue such male-dominated subjects as math and science in later years.

The explanation for this is that girls are more likely to join in classroom work, more likely to demonstrate their intelligence, in the absence of the opposite sex.

Yet if there is hope in all this for our daughters, what does it say about our sons? I fear it says this: Boys, being boys, are a problem.

Boosters of all-girls programs variously describe boys as loud, aggressive and distracting in the classroom. And in some cases, they can be.



University of Alberta professor Heather Blair has studied same-gender programs extensively.



CREDIT: Rick MacWilliam, The Journal, File

U of A professor Heather Blair has studied co-ed classrooms.

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In one of her early research projects, Blair spent a year studying a co-ed classroom.

No more Mr. Nice Guy

Blair said boys in the class were obnoxious to the girls.

Much of this behaviour, she said, would be deemed sexual harassment if it were carried out by men.

Blair said the harassment was being done only by a small group. But what concerned her was that none of the silent majority of boys stepped in to make it stop.

I'm not surprised. Boys are just as much the victims of bullies as girls. Just as girls can be bullies, too.

Yes, boys can also suffer in co-ed classrooms.

Just like girls, they are stifled by social pressures. Just like girls, boys will hold back in order to save face in front of the opposite sex.

Unlike girls, boys tend to have literacy problems. They tend to drop out of school more often and commit suicide more often.

Given that, why hasn't an all-boys junior high school been established, so boys can be helped to reach their full potential, as well?

Why? Because males are almost never considered the victims of gender dynamics.

We live in a time where gender issues are largely considered women's issues. It is still difficult to talk about men's issues without being described as sexist.

To detractors, men's issues are a conspiracy to undermine feminism. This is a specious argument. Men today not only honour, but demand equal rights for women and girls. But we also demand that boys and men not be denigrated in the process.

Paul Nathanson, who co-wrote the book *Spreading Misandry*, says there is danger in these all-girls schools. Not in and of themselves, but in the way boys are described as the essential problem for girls.

Nathanson's book -- misandry, by the way, means hatred of men -- shows how our culture, especially in its movies and TV shows, routinely depicts males as violent, inadequate or dense. Little boys raised in such a culture, Nathanson fears, will end up fulfilling this prophecy.

In the same way, if all boys are described as too aggressive in schools, this becomes the gender role they are more likely to adopt.

Instead of seeing this column as an attack on feminism and all-girls schools, please see it as a plea for reverse equality; as a plea for all-boys junior high programs, as well.

With the right male teachers as role models, with a curriculum that stresses positive masculine traits, we are far more likely to end up with confident, erudite and honourable men.

This can no longer be a contest, a battle of the sexes.

We all got a bad deal in traditional gender roles.

Girls were for too long held back politically, socially and economically.

Boys were held back emotionally.

For our kids' sake, this has to be a cooperative dance of the genders. Boys aren't contagious either.

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