

**The Times**

**4 February, 2011**

**Are single-sex schools the best option? An age-old debate has reopened as co-educational schools achieve dominance**

**Alan Smithers**

When my daughters were growing up, the best local school was only for girls, and both went there. One loved it but the other hated it. She found it bitchy and was put off by the tears of girls who got only an A and not an A-plus.

I was happy to move her to a good coeducational school, because I knew from our research that she was likely to do just as well there academically, but emotionally it would be much better for her. And she thrived (as did her sister).

Single-sex schools have been largely swept away, not because of their failings, but in the drive to comprehensive education. The one my daughters went to is no more. Those remaining not unnaturally want to press their case as they fight to survive. But when girls are carrying all before them in exams it is ludicrous to claim that they have to be protected from the domination of boys to do their best.

League tables can create the illusion of girls' schools doing better, but it is not so much the school as girls being so far ahead in exams.

We hear less about the merits of co-educational schools because they feel secure. But when they were in the minority they argued powerfully that educating the sexes together led to fuller emotional development and better understanding of the other sex. Bringing together male and female perspectives enriches education, the understanding of literature for example.

Co-education is also claimed to make for a smoother transition to the mixed-sex environment of university and life generally. Certainly when I was at university some of my fellow students used to target girls from single-sex schools in the hope that they would be less able to control their passions. (But generally they were disappointed, because it is mainly a matter of personality.)

None of this is to suggest that we should do away with single-sex schools. It is arguable there may now be too few. It is true that even parents who themselves went to single-sex schools are more likely to want their children to go to co-educational schools.

But there are those who, for personal, cultural or religious reasons, feel strongly that they want their daughters to be educated apart from boys and that choice should be open to them. It will be interesting to see how many of the new free schools opt to be single sex.

Whether a school takes both sexes or only one is such an obvious feature that it is not surprising that differences in educational performance should be attributed to it. But how well a school does has much more to do with the quality of the head and the teachers, and the abilities and background of the children.

There are excellent single-sex schools and excellent co-educational schools. But they are excellent for reasons other than that they separate, or bring together, the sexes for their education. Parents should go with their instincts and choose what they think would best suit their children.

END