

An old debate and some recent events

In this month's *TCFNews* there is a discussion of the long standing arguments about which is best - single sex or co-ed secondary schools. Traditionally single sex school have been thought to have better academic outcomes and co-ed schools better social outcomes. In this article the research is canvassed and some new views expressed to help decisions about which school is best for my child.

Also this month is a report on the launch of TCFNSW brochures on religious education in NSW public schools and a report on the TCFNSW presence at the 150th Anniversary of Scripture Union.

TCFNSW wishes all members a happy Christmas with lots of celebrations for the greatest intervention into the history of the world - the birth of Jesus our saviour.

John Gore

Single sex or co-ed: Does it matter?

Seemingly forever, there has been an ongoing debate about whether a child attending a single sex secondary school has advantages or disadvantages, or both, over a child attending a co-ed school. The answer would seem obvious, that there are some advantages and some disadvantages but what are they? Parents need to know this information, as one parameter to be considered, when choosing a school for their child. Do we as Christian educators have any preferences or particular insights?

Past research

Until recently, studies have shown that the academic outcomes of students in single sex schools have consistently been better than those in co-ed schools.

- *Single-sex schools were perceived as having a more academic orientation, with greater task emphasis and competition* (Trickett 1982)
- *girls who attend single-sex schools are more confident about themselves as learners in subjects such as mathematics and physics than in coeducational schools.* (Forgasz 2007)
- *both boys and girls who were educated in single-sex classrooms scored on average 15 to 22 percentile ranks higher than did boys and girls in coeducational settings.* (ACER 2000)

Some researchers identified other advantages:

- *attendance at a girls' school was a significant predictor of a girl's exposure to key social influences, her enrolment in a science course in year 12, and her academic achievement.* (Carpenter et al1987)
- *boys and girls in single-sex schools were more likely to be better behaved and to find learning more enjoyable and the curriculum more relevant* (ACER 2000)

However, other researchers see negative considerations:

- *may lead to the development of gender stereotypes and sexism, a respected American psychology professor has revealed. (Halpern 2016)*

Recent research

In recent years, there have been studies that have challenged the orthodoxy of single sex schools and higher achievement. Some have led to newspaper articles like *Co-ed schools outshine single sex* (SMH 3/10/17). The Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) is reported as saying *children at co-ed schools learn at the same speed, and sometimes even faster, than their peers at boys' and girls' schools*. However, the article goes on to explain that this applies to reading in the NAPLAN tests which only measures to Year 9. There was no difference for numeracy skills and that, despite this finding on learning rates, academic outcomes of single sex schools are better as per the earlier ACER study. The article also highlighted that single sex schools are becoming less numerous as school systems move to co-ed. The SMH website later retitled this article *Single-sex schools will disappear by 2035, warns education body*. Both headlines are further "triumphs" for the SMH sub-editors.

In the USA, (Marsh 1989) examined 2,332 Catholic high school students attending one of 47 single-sex or 33 co-ed schools included in the nationally representative *High School and Beyond (HSB)* study and found that *changes in a wide variety of outcomes during this critical sophomore-to-senior period were nearly unaffected by school type*. Marsh is also critical of the methodology used in earlier studies in his attempt to highlight the different outcomes of his own work. Given that in the USA schools are over 90% public schools and that his sample is the Catholic system, there is some scepticism about the application of his finding to all USA schools.

In a New Zealand study (Harker 2000) found that there were gender differences but they were not related to the type of school. The study included only 37 schools.

Finally, according to Professor Diane Halpern (Halpern 2016), past president of the American Psychological Association, *recent analyses of same-sex and co-educational schooling failed to find any advantages of single-sex education*.

However, Prof Halpern said research did show people become more stereotyped in their beliefs about other groups when they are segregated, and co-educational schools teach children essential life skills for interacting with the opposite sex.

I have a few concerns about this statement because I cannot find the *recent analyses* to verify these statements and her article goes on to indicate that the better performing OECD countries like Finland have co-ed schooling. There are a number of other contributing or balancing factors besides co-ed schooling.

While there is an argument to be put shortly for co-ed schools, there is still no compelling evidence that negates the long term findings that academic outcomes for students in single sex schools are greater than those in co-ed schools. In NSW public schools, the long term position from value-added regression analysis has been that single sex schools out-perform co-ed schools and that single sex girls' schools out-perform single sex boys' schools.

Socialisation verses academic achievement

In 1996, I moved home and my son was still in high school. His local school was a well- respected boys' school with high academic achievement and my preferred option. But rebellion was in the wind with a flat refusal to attend anything but a co-ed school. With two older sisters he was very comfortable with both boys and girls and valued the relations with both sexes.

His desire for a co-ed environment reflected the trends in schooling whereby many single sex schools have become co-ed in both the private and public sectors and no new single sex schools have been built. Some of the advantages claimed for co-education are:

- Offers school diversity
- Teaches equality
- Promotes socialization
- Prepares students for the real world
- Improves communication skills
- Challenges sexism

But for these recognised advantages there are disadvantages. They include:

- Attraction leads to distraction
- Harassment of mainly girls occurs more
- Conflicts of interest between girls and boys
- Girls have a learning advantage by maturing earlier

While the internet is awash with argument there is little research quoted. Opinions are often formed from experience. As we already know, schools differ and there is not a definitive answer to the question about which type of school is overall the best. Western countries seem to favour the value of co-education and have moved that way arguing that the social benefits are best for a civil society. But there remains the stinging reality that students perform better academically in single sex schools. Why?

A culture of learning

School culture is difficult to define. It is often a reflection of tradition built up over many years. It may be about reputation in the community rightly or wrongly earned. It is certainly about promoting its successes and encouraging the present cohort to live up to traditions, reputation and achievements. School culture can be both positive and negative. It can soar through high expectations or be sunk by low expectations. It can be strongly supported by its community or be cut off by poor communication and a lack of hospitality. There are a myriad of aspects that produce school culture - both good and bad.

The reason that single sex secondary schools outperform co-ed schools is likely to be answered by school culture. Single sex schools have a capacity to develop a culture of learning that allows them to out-perform co-ed schools. A focus on learning and achievement, competitiveness and willingness to take risks in learning provide a culture that lifts students to achieve their best. Somehow, high expectations permeate staff and parents and the students rise to these through good teaching and study practices.

However, there will always be some students for who this culture is not suitable. Each school has its challenges, whether it is the bravado of some boys intimidating others or the cattiness of some girls isolating others. But on balance, the single sex schools produce better learning outcomes than co-ed schools. The final question is what is most important to parents and their children? Is it a simple choice?

The right school

As a parent, choosing a secondary school is one of the toughest decisions you can make and it's no easier being a Christian parent with the attraction of an ever increasing number of Christian schools. It's a decision that ideally the child will be involved in, after all it's the child who will have to attend the chosen school day after day and, if they are not happy, then it is likely that the whole family will feel the brunt of dissatisfaction.

For many parents there is no choice. There may be only one local high school available and affordable. Other parents have greater options, especially if they can pursue private education. If this option exists, it

should be remembered that academic achievement is only one outcome of schooling. A single sex school might be right for a daughter who has only brothers in the family or vice versa. There are many social and developmental reasons why parents might choose either single sex or co-ed schooling. The bottom line might well be, which school has the better culture for learning, remembering that not all single sex schools are automatically able to achieve better for academic outcomes, and that there is more to schooling than academic performance. Reputation has to be earned.

As for my son, he chose a co-ed public school with a good reputation of achievement. He had moderate success academically, but has exceptional social, organisational, communicating and speaking skills that have assisted him to become the Australian and New Zealand CEO of an international Christian organization supporting the persecuted church. God has his own plans. Trust him.

John Gore

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High tea and religious education

A vast array of educational experience assembled on Saturday 4 November for the TCFNSW launch of new brochures about religious education in public schools aimed at parents and teachers. The venue was Old Government House Parramatta and scones, jam and cream were only surpassed by a variety of cakes and fruit for the sugar averters. Thanks to Pam for all her organisation.

As friends from city and country met and shared the high tea, it was good to note the common concern for religious education in public schools and the desire for TCFNSW to continue to support both general religious

education and special religious education (scripture). Harley Mills, President of TCFNSW introduced the formal part of the gathering and promoted the brochures with copies being given to everyone. These brochures are based on an article by John Gore on *Religious education in NSW public schools: a less certain future* which is available in full under the title *Religious education* on the TCFNSW website www.tcfofnsw.org.au A copy of each will be posted shortly to you with your membership renewal form. You can contact the office for multiple copies.



John Gore then spoke about the content of the brochures outlining the issues for schools and providers of special religious education. He highlighted concerns about the secularisation of the curriculum which is moving more and more to omit religious influences in history and today's world and ignore the religious faith of key figures. He believes history is being distorted through this process. He also drew attention to the difference between the Department's definition of general religious education and the legal definition (non-denominational Christianity) which gives Christian teachers in public schools more latitude than they believe to express their faith.

In relation to special religious education, John Gore emphasised the impact on schools of the insufficient availability of teachers, the impact of changes to the enrolment card and the difficulties of negotiating time for special religious education in secondary schools.

There was question time before winding up a



thoroughly worthwhile afternoon.

TCF at Scripture Union 150th Celebration

Teachers' Christian Fellowship ran a stall at the Scripture Union 150th celebration on 21st October 2017. Harley Mills, Lyn Searle and Dianne Young manned the stall with input from Pam Griffin when she wasn't doing Scripture Union chores. We were strategically placed next to the stall for special religious education (SRE) teachers and school chaplains.

There was keen interest in our new information brochures for parents and teachers on *Religions in NSW Public Schools*. These were handed out to teachers, SRE teachers, parents and grandparents. One SRE teacher was very keen to include this brochure in the kindergarten enrolment package. It would be wonderful if all schools followed her example. A number of retired teachers, including present and past TCF members, visited our stall.

One member of the public told us about moves in his local area by principals to remove paid SRE teachers from schools and only allow one seminar a term. I discussed the legislation with him and suggested he needed more support from TCF members.

It was a most enjoyable day with many membership brochures, TCF Facebook cards, pens and information brochures given out and old friendships renewed.

Dianne Young



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