



BOYS-ONLY SCHOOLS

DO THEY HAVE A PLACE IN THE 21ST CENTURY?

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Two separate schools of thought

There are now far fewer single-sex schools in Scotland, but there is plenty evidence to show boys and girls still learn better apart.

By Cate Devine

THE number of single-sex schools in Scotland shrank to 13 this week when the Edinburgh Academy began accepting girls to the senior school for the first time in its 184-year history. There are now only five boys-only schools and eight girls-only schools in Scotland – and only one of them, Notre Dame in Glasgow, is in the state sector.

It seems clear that single-sex education in the UK as a whole is out of fashion or out of reach – or both. There are now 400 single-sex schools in the state sector compared to 2500 only 30 years ago, and in the past decade 130 independent single-sex schools have either become co-educational or have closed altogether.

But is single-sex education really heading for oblivion? Despite appearances, the answer is not clear-cut.

Market forces were the main reason for the historic changeover at Edinburgh Academy, which has a strong and active parent group. "Parents were increasingly interested in exploring the options for their daughters having the same opportunities as their sons," explains new rector Marco Longmore, who has previous experience of working at three independent co-educational schools. "Our commitment remains to focus on the individual, to enhance academic performance and to form well-rounded adults. The sexes do learn in different ways, but I don't believe in gender stereotyping."

Research undertaken by the Department of Education and Skills in June 2005 recognised that teaching boys and girls separately resulted in improved concentration skills among many subjects. So, if boys and girls learn in very different ways, as is widely accepted,



the challenges in maintaining the £3560 a term Academy's long and noble history must surely be substantial.

Longmore believes that it's worth the effort. "Co-education provides a natural setting for young people to be educated alongside each other, preparing them for life beyond school."

However, Andrew Hunter, head teacher of Merchiston of Edinburgh, the only UK boys-only boarding school outside the south of England, disagrees. While he is careful to maintain a balanced view, he says: "We shouldn't assume that co-education is a natural and normal lifestyle," he says. "Girls are more emotionally mature than boys. Boys of the same age can be hijacked by the laddish culture and start to believe that it's not cool to study."

The traditional argument against same-sex schools is that they engender an inability to relate

to the opposite sex. "Merchiston, which is quite remote, makes great efforts to ensure its pupils have regular social and curricular contact with its sister single-sex schools, St George's and St Margaret's in Edinburgh and Kilgraston in Perth," says Hunter. "A boys school must prepare its pupils for the real world. It would be wrong not to; after all, the chances are a large percentage of our boys will end up with a female boss."

Gillian Stobo, principal of Craigholme girls' school in Glasgow, agrees that as girls' and boys' brains function differently at different times, particularly when very young and during adolescence, segregation for learning is necessary. "There's a significant difference in the way girls interact and learn," she says. "Girls like to work collaboratively and they have longer concentration spans. Single-sex classrooms are safe risk-taking environments where

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the pupils get actively involved and learn from their mistakes without fear of being put down. This builds self-confidence and empowerment. They learn to define themselves as people, not just by their gender."

By definition, gender stereotyping of subjects is also impossible in a single-sex school, she argues. "Girls see girls learning maths, science, engineering and languages, which fosters a can-do approach later in life."

The study by the Department of Education and Skills in 2005

found the proportion of A grades achieved at A-level in all-girl independent schools was, on average, 10% higher than that of girls in co-educational independent schools across a range of subjects.

By contrast, last year's SQA exam results showed that the gulf between the performance of co-educated girls and boys across all subjects and stages remains wide – at S5 level, 25% of girls achieved three or more Highers against 19% of boys.

Eric Wilkinson, professor of education at Glasgow University, said: "This is a motivational problem in the sense that boys are not engaging with the learning process in the same way as girls and that is a professional matter for teachers to address."

Yet parental choice of single-sex education is largely only available in the private sector. In 2004, following the school exam results which showed 55% of Higher

passes going to girls compared with 45% to boys, then First Minister Jack McConnell and the then Glasgow education convener Stephen Purcell mooted the possibility of introducing single-sex classes within co-educational schools to boost results for boys in English and maths.

Glasgow City Council said yesterday that it was not an idea they were likely to pursue. Nevertheless, some co-educational schools are choosing to adopt "gender setting" for certain subjects to help lower-achieving pupils – teaching boys and girls separately in, for example, English or maths. Daziel High School in Motherwell, North Lanarkshire, introduced single-sex classes in standard grade Maths and English for a four-year period starting in 2001. "The boys' results, behaviour and motivation improved well," said Pauline Allison, principal teacher of maths. Changes to the timetable

The last 13

Scottish girls schools
Craigholme School, Glasgow,
www.craigholme.co.uk

Fernhill School, Glasgow,
www.fernhill.school.co.uk

Kilgraston, Perthshire,
www.kilgraston.com

St George's Schools, Edinburgh,
www.st-georges.edinburgh.sch.uk

St Margaret's School For Girls, Aberdeen,
www.st-margaret.aberdeen.sch.uk

St Margaret's School, Edinburgh,
www.st-margarets.edin.sch.uk

The Mary Erskine School, Edinburgh,
www.mirms.edin.sch.uk

Notre Dame High School, Glasgow,
www.notredamehigh.org

Scottish boys schools
Falkland House School, Fife,
www.falklandhouseschool.org

Hillside School, Aberdeen, Fife,
www.hillsideschool.co.uk

Merchiston Castle School, Edinburgh,
www.merchiston.co.uk

Parview School, Dundee,
Call 01382 657993

Stewart's Mobile College, Edinburgh,
www.stsm.edin.sch.uk

STEP FORWARD: Pupils at Merchiston Castle School.
Picture: Steve Cox

and a lack of dedicated accommodation put an end to the initiative, but Allison says "It's something he would be happy to do again."

Another state school in Renfrewshire started gender setting third year English last year to "fantastic" effect. "The lower-achieving boys were taught separately in small groups and their attainment levels showed a marked improvement," said the principal teacher of English, who declined to be named. "The boys stopped showing off and knuckled down, because there were no girls to show off to." He has continued the system for the same boys to Standard Grade.

Many state school teachers believe that gender-setting, or single sex classes, is "the way forward for education in the future" but that its success depends, as ever, on increased resources, accommodation and access to more dedicated teachers.