

Chapter 88

A Comparative Analysis of Single–Sex Education in the United Kingdom and Australia

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ABSTRACT

Single-gender education or Single-Sex Education (SSE) has reemerged in the educational reform discussion as experts seek to establish clearer pathways to literacy in the 21st century. SSE discusses how students learn best in a convergent global model of emergent literacy practices. Views of single-gender education in the UK and Australia differ with respect to motivational underpinnings and perceptions of the efficacy of SSE. Central to the SSE debate in both countries is the widening achievement gap between boys and girls, particularly in the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) disciplines. Both countries are moving toward a parallel model of SSE, offering gender-differentiated instruction in single-gender classrooms within co-educational schools. The chapter compares SSE in the two countries with respect to gender perspectives in curriculum and pedagogy; cultural, religious, and socio-economic motivations in school orientations; and the perceived returns on education for students schooled in a single-sex environment.

INTRODUCTION

Single gender education or single-sex education (SSE) has reemerged in the debate vis-à-vis how best students learn supported by local frameworks of education culture in a larger global model of pedagogical practices and contexts. The question remains whether there is, in fact, a convergent global model of SSE; or whether school systems are diverging from original European sources of

practice. As in the case of the United States, single-sex education was introduced to many countries through the colonial process, or through migration of peoples from Europe. Single-sex education began in the United Kingdom (UK) in mid 1400s with the introduction of grammar schools for boys. It was not until the mid-1800s however, that public schooling became available to women. Some twenty years later in 1870, the creation of national elementary schools resulted in many

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single-sex schools becoming co-educational due to financial reasons. This marked the introduction of the model of gender-separated classes within the co-educational setting, or parallel education, a form of SSE commonly practiced in Australia (Anderson- Levitt, 2003).

In a bid to develop a more inclusive framework of educational practices that responds to the needs of students within minority, low socio-economic and generally marginalized student groups, SSE has reemerged in the education debate as a possible answer to narrowing the achievement gap between rich and poor, and between male and female students, particularly in the sciences, information technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) disciplines (*National Association for Single-Sex Public Education* (NASSPE), 2011). The notion of ‘separate but equal’, which is considered inherently discriminatory, is perhaps what calls into question the efficacy of any separation by gender, race, or class as a means of providing an equitable learning environment, and therefore calls into question the efficacy of SSE. Globally, the proponents of single-sex education tout its ability to narrow achievement gaps, stem curriculum and subject choice polarization, and reduce subsequent academic and career gender stereotypes; as well as avail students and parents with an opportunity to choose their preferred learning environment (Hutchison, 2012; Sax, 2002; Jackson & Smith, 2000; Sullivan, Joshi, & Leonard, 2010). Opponents on the other hand present concerns regarding the lack of socialization between the sexes in preparation for “real” life, the shaky empirical basis of the efficacy of SSE practice, and the possible marginalization of genders inherent in segregation practices; (Tsolidis & Dobson, 2006; Asthana, 2006; Jackson & Ivins, 2013) with particular concerns regarding the engendering of homophobic and other intolerant, prejudicial viewpoints claimed to be fostered in the SSE environment (Younger & Warrington, 2006; Carter, 2010).

Anderson-Levitt (2003) purports that the “model of mass education” emanated from a mutual foundation and that schools move toward similitude overtime. This notion suggests that schooling and global culture are perhaps becoming a more homogenous reality. This comparative analysis will examine the approaches to SSE in United Kingdom and Australia in the primary through secondary grades, and will explore how the phenomenon has been shaped by the following in the individual local contexts: a) gender perspectives in curriculum and pedagogy, b) cultural, religious and socio-economic motivations in school orientations, and c) perceived returns on education for students schooled in a single-sex environment.

GENDER PERSPECTIVES IN CURRICULUM AND PEDAGOGY

Even in the 21st century, the issues related to gender are multifaceted and complex, among them, the salient issue of single-sex education. Gender equity in the “traditional” classroom is an age-old concern when assessing the disparities in achievement between males and females. As such, a transformative approach to gender equity and the civil and feminist rights gains of women are continuing subjects in the discourse surrounding SSE. A transformative approach to education considers the social underpinnings of education culture and deliberately targets the structures that preclude gender equality. Within the current paradigm, some educators qualify the benefits of SSE education in light of gendered social, brain, or other benefits that either enhance or can be derived from separate learning environments (Aldridge, 2009). While the field remains divided on many issues, scholars appear to agree that the marginalization of women remains an issue with deeply rooted historical and psychological educational foundations; and that in most societies gender inequalities are a structural reality sometimes

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