Are Single Gender Schools a Good Answer?

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Are Single-Gender Schools a Good Answer?

If school districts are allowed to create single gender schools or classrooms, is this a good solution to help close the education gap in most inner city schools? Or, is this a way for a school district to set themselves apart from the rest by utilizing innovative ideas and use them to garner attention (Ballantine and Spade, 2012)? In 1999, the Jefferson Leadership Academies opened its new school year as the first middle school in the United States to offer single-gender classes to its 1,000 student population in the State of California. The Academy was created in response to research indicating boys were twice as much to get more attention by the teachers than girls and the intent was to close the gap between girls and boys. In the State of Texas, one school district took it a step further and converted two underperforming middle schools into single gender which sparked a lawsuit from the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) of Texas. The school district in Texas implemented the single-gender concept as an attempt to help close the gap of the “boy crisis which was created due to the heavy emphasis placed on female’s educational disadvantage in the past few decades” (Ballantine and Spade, 2012, p.328).

Literature Review

The following research will explore the experiences of two participants who were or are part of a single-sex school and not intended to gather information to determine whether single gender schools are the right answer to help close the academic gap. In order to achieve such study, it would require a longer timeline and additional resources. Even though there is research data pertaining to single gender schools, there is no clear research at this time that indicates single gender schools perform better than co-ed schools. In a comprehensive study, Morse (1998, p.2) stated the following points:
• There is no evidence that single-sex education in general “works” or is “better” than coeducation.
• No matter whether in a coed or a single-sex setting, educators and policymakers need to work further to identify the components of a “good education”.
• Single-sex educational programs produce results for some students in some settings.

During a recent study of single-sex education in the Republic of Trinidad, it was alluded that it may be beneficial for female students who might be interested in a single-sex school environment but it might not be ideal for boys or most girls Zubrzycki (2012). Sikora (2014) states “single-sex schools are commonly seen as learning environments which effectively encourage girls to take up the study of science, technology, engineering and mathematics fields” (p. 402).

Our society has a tendency to dictate how young men and women should act and what roles they will have in school (Ornestein and Levine, 2011). In single-sex schools, students are not exposed to that environment and feel comfortable to act differently. For those who are against the single-sex schools such as the ACLU, believe that “in functional theory, schools are analyzed in terms of their functions, or purposes, in the whole system” (Ornestein and Levine, 2011, p. 17).

Methodology

Participants

The data collection for this study was gathered through two participants in the form of one face to face interview and the second through email correspondence. The questions to both participants can be viewed in Appendix A. Both participants will remain anonymous and pseudo names will be used throughout this study. The first participant is a white female educator in a middle school that was converted to a single gender school two years ago and will be referred as
Teacher Jane. Teacher Jane has been willing to participate in additional interviews since she was assured this research will not be published. She will have access to this research project and will ensure her answers to the questions were not altered or misunderstood. Teacher Jane is a current military wife and has four years of teaching experience with the last two at the School of Boys which is 30 minutes from her current residence. Her move to Central Texas was due to her husband’s military permanent change of station.

The second participant is a recent 2015 graduate from the Ann Richards School for Young Women Leaders and is currently a member of the Texas Army National Guard. The participant will be identified by the pseudo name Private First Class (PFC) Rosa and was recently a participant for the 136th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade (MEB) Best Warrior Competition (BWC) competing for an opportunity to represent her unit at the Texas Military Forces BWC next February at Camp Mabry, TX. PFC Rosa is 18 years old and of Hispanic heritage.

The school district and middle school Teacher Jane is currently employed with will be referred to as Central District and the school will be identified as School of Boys. Both entities do not want additional exposure due to the pending litigation from the ACLU of Texas which has accused the school district of interfering with the equal learning of students through the segregation of sex. The school district has maintained it has received full support from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and also the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC). The School of Boys has a student enrollment of 426 as of 11 September 2015 in the grades of 6-8 and was a low performing co-ed middle school prior to its conversion with Unacceptable ratings from 2008-2009 and 2010 as a co-ed school.
The Ann Richards School first opened its doors in 2007 in the city of Austin, TX as an all girls middle school for 6th and 7th grade classes, and added one class level each year until integration of the 12th grade level was completed by the fall of 2012. The school enrollment at Ann Richards is currently at 773 and was rated as Acceptable by the Teachers Education Agency (TEA) for 2013-2014 and Met Standard in 2015. An admission to the school is open to any female within the Austin Independent School District and qualified students are chosen based on a lottery.

**Findings**

Prior to her arrival to the School of Boys, Teacher Jane taught at a rural school in South Texas and has been exposed to teaching economically disadvantaged and minority students. All data she has provided is public record and can be accessed through the school website and will be provided upon request. She applied for other positions within Central District but based on her answer the only opening at that time was at the School of Boys. Teacher Jane is motivated to make the 30 minute drive every day because she wants to make a difference in the young men that attend the School of Boys. She expresses no desire to move to another school district at this time unless she has to move due to her husband’s military status.

There are disciplinary challenges she faces everyday and one good example was provided by her husband when he stated a student yelled “I shot Tupac” earning himself a referral to the principal’s office. She enjoys her time teaching the students since they are not distracted by the opposite sex and are required to use a school uniform. She believes in the single-sex school concept but cannot truly validate it is the best option for the school district since she started at the same time the school was converted. Teacher Jane is perceived by her students as a wealthy
person and has been told numerous times by her students that she will never understand their situation since she does not reside within their neighborhood and mostly because she is white.

For Private First (PFC) Class Rosa, she never thought attending the Ann Richards School for Young Women Leaders would be a great experience for her even though she had mixed reservations during her initial admissions process. Her main concern was the single gender status but her parents were influential in her decision to apply since she is a 1st Generation College Bound Student. According to PFC Rosa, “Ann Richards has opened the doors for me and helped me grow as a person” (personal communication, November 14, 2015) and her responses resonated the determination she had while she answered questions by Command Sergeant Major (CSM) Carter. Based on her responses, PFC Rosa was never distracted with the everyday concerns that an average teenager faces in a coed school.

**Discussion**

According to the TEA’s 2015 accountability ratings, School of Boys received a Met Standard in 2015 despite its 98.4% Economically Disadvantaged Student population. This is important to understand because prior to its conversion to an all boys school the TEA ratings were Unacceptable for a school that open its doors in the fall of 2007. Most of the research on covered in the literature review focuses on how a student can benefit from attending a single-sex school and not whether it is better than a coed school.

During the 136th MEB BWC interviews, I was amazed how a young 18 year old female soldier seemed so determined and was very articulate on her responses to the questions from CSM Carter. There were other seasoned soldiers that were not as articulate or focused like PFC Rosa and even CSM Carter point it out while he was talking to all 10 competitors. I
congratulated PFC Rosa for being the only female competitor and she stated “thanks to the Ann Richards School I was able to learn how to be self-independent and strong” (personal communication, November 14, 2015).

**Conclusion**

Single-sex schools can be an answer for the most part to close the achievement gap but not all students will benefit from this education system. There is no current research that supports or indicates single-sex schools are better than coed or whether it is the best option for low performing students. The participants in this study believe single-sex schools provide an environment free of distractions from the opposite sex and an opportunity to grow academically. As our society tries to find a way to close the achievement gap, innovative programs or schools will continue to develop in hopes of finding a good solution.
Reference List


Appendix A

Interview questions for Teacher A:

1. How long have you been teaching at School of Boys?

2. Have you ever taught at a school that served economically disadvantaged students?
   Minority students?

3. Why did you decide to teach at School of Boys?

4. Why are you willing to drive 30 minutes from your current residence to teach at School of Boys?

5. What do you think of the single gender school compared to the one you taught in South Texas that was co-ed?

6. What type of behavioral problems have you experienced with your current students at the School of Boys compared to the co-ed school in South Texas?
7. What is your current experience with the parental involvement at the School of Boys?

8. What kind of information would you give her family members to encourage them to send their children to a single gender school?

Email from SPC Rosa:

From: xxxxxxxxxxxx@gmail.com>
Sent: Tuesday, December 1, 2015 3:36 PM
To: Jose Escobedo
Subject: Re: Interview Questions

1SG Escobedo,

Attached is a document with my response to your questions. I hope this helps and gives you an insight at a all gender female school. If you have any other questions or need clarification on some of my responses feel free to email me.

Thank you,
SPC XXXXXXXX

Interview questions for PFC Rosa:

1. What was the reason you chose to apply for the Ann Richards School?
Applying to the Ann Richards School was not my first choice or thought of going to that school. I remember I was in fifth grade at Allison Elementary when the principal Jeanne Goka of Ann Richards came to visit my elementary school at the time. I remember telling my fifth grade teacher that I would not apply or go to that school because it was a single gender school. Little did I know that my teacher called my parents that night and spoke with them about the school and how it could be beneficial for me. My parents wanted me to go to a school where I would get a great education and not be distracted or fall into a path of a troubled kid. Both my parents never went to college, and they wanted that for me. My parents felt that going to Ann Richards would be the best thing for me and as reluctant as little fifth grader that I was at the time I applied to the school. Now looking back I am thankful for my fifth grade teacher Mr. Woodage and my parents for leading me in the direction to go to Ann Richards because I have learned and gained so much knowledge.

2. Compared to co-ed schools what did you see as an advantage in attending the Ann Richards school?
Attending the Ann Richards School allowed me to stay focused on my school work. In class there were no distractions of boys as well as what clothes to wear because we had to wear a
uniform. Our classes were 90 minutes long, but within that time we were able to get a lot done compared to a 45 minute class.

I didn’t know anything different than Ann Richards, I attended the school from 6th grade till my senior year. I would talk to other friends and family members who went to co-ed schools and some were always worried about the wrong things, such as what the cool stuff to wear or playing around in class, skipping classes, or boyfriends/ girlfriends.

3. Would you recommend this school to your siblings? If so, why?
I have three little sisters and one of my sisters will be going into 6th grade in two years. Of course I would like for my sisters to experience the fun traditions that co-ed school may have, but I would like for them to attend Ann Richards. Ann Richards gave me the opportunity to engage in my learning without distractions, build my confidence and gain knowledge beyond just school work. My sisters will be able to grow and gain friendships and bonds with teachers that will last forever. I have had my ups and downs with Ann Richards but I can honestly say that the school benefited me and I know it will for my sisters and I will recommend it to other girls.

4. How did attending the Ann Richards prepare you to face the challenges after graduation?
Ann Richards did a lot to prepare me for college, our field trips that we started taking in 6th grade consisted of visiting colleges. In my 9th grade summer I went to Washington DC with my school to visit colleges that were out the state of Texas. We have also taken over night and day trips, another great college trip that was when I went to Louisiana to visit LSU, Tulane and Loyola University. I have taken Pre-AP classes and once I entered in highschool I took AP classes, it was a requirement for us. I was focused on my school work and every night from when I was in 6th grade till my senior year I would get homework from almost every class and I would stay up late to finish my work. Ann Richards taught me how to manage my time and to not procrastinate because due dates for project will roll around and homework can build up. Ann Richards also helped prepare us for when it was time to take the SAT and the ACT, and when it came time to apply for college they helped along the lines with that. Ann Richards taught me many useful tips that I could use for college and grow on. I have went through interviews and done an internship at Dell Children’s Hospital. Ann Richards has opened doors for me and helped me grow as a person.