

## CO-ED OR SINGLE-SEX SCHOOLS?

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As a parent of a school-aged daughter it feels like I've engaged in, or overheard in playgrounds and kids' parties, roughly a million conversations about the pros and cons of single sex schools vs co-ed schools.

The angst-ridden nature of these conversations would make you think that school choice is one of the most important decisions a parent is ever going to make for their child. Many of these conversations feature "facts" about the benefits of single-sex schooling.

But how well do these facts stand up to scrutiny? While single sex schools typically outperform co-educational schools in terms of academic results, it's unclear whether this is due to the absence of the opposite sex or other factors, such as socio-economic status of parents.

Kids who attend well-resourced schools tend to do better academically than kids at poorer schools, unfair as that may be. As most single-sex schools in Australia are private schools or select-entry schools, the benefits may have more to do with the socio-economic backgrounds of the kids, rather than the gender make-up. [...]

One particularly entrenched view is that single-sex schools are good for girls' science and maths education. Girls, it's suggested, will "dumb down" to fit with persistent gender stereotypes about girls not being innately good at these subjects. But the evidence is hardly compelling.

Sociologist Dr Sikora from the Australian National University found that while girls at gender-segregated schools are slightly more likely to pursue science in their final years of schooling compared to their peers who attend co-ed schools, it's unclear whether this has to do with the absence of boys.

Other factors, such as coming from a wealthier family and, in the case of physical sciences at least, being born overseas and speaking a language other than English at home, appear to be important factors in girls' selection and performance in science subjects [...].

And even accepting that girls from single sex schools are more likely to opt for science subjects in their senior years, it doesn't seem to have a lasting impact.

Dr Sikora found that while boys attending single-sex schools are likely to express an interest in careers in medicine or physiotherapy compared to boys at co-ed schools, girls attending single-sex schools don't aspire to careers in science any more than girls who share classrooms with boys. How lasting the effects of single-sex schooling are is a theme that comes up in other research.

Schools, however, do more than provide academic outcomes. They also play a role in the development of children's identity and socialisation. And when it comes to single sex schools, that includes a strong pitch to parents about how the school will inculcate gender identity.