

Single Sex Education

One of the many advantages of my job here is that I have an office full of windows which enable me to look out at our beautiful grounds and to witness the great pleasure that the girls take in the green open space available to them. On a gloriously sunny but rather snowy day at the end of last term, I watched as a group of Year 9 girls went back to their childhoods for a few brief minutes, making 'snow angels' and chasing each other with snowballs. How wonderful, I thought, to have that freedom; to throw caution to the winds, to have no worries about who was watching, who was judging, what they looked like, whether or not what they were doing would be considered 'cool'.



I wonder if they could have behaved in such a carefree fashion in a mixed school?

There are many advantages to single sex schools. I could quote reams of statistics which show that girls achieve better results, have more leadership opportunities, go on to pursue a wider range of more challenging careers and generally outdo their contemporaries in co-educational schools having benefited from an education in an all girls' school. To quote the Curriculum Evaluation and Management Centre (CEM) at Durham, "Almost without exception when ability variation is taken into account, the average performance of pupils of both genders in single sex schools is better than the average performance of their counterparts in mixed schools by a significant margin."

But there is so much more to education than academic achievement and for me the single most powerful argument for single sex education is that a girl, at a time when she is at her most sensitive, her most vulnerable, emotionally and socially, her most impressionable, has, in an all girls' school, the freedom to be herself.

I recently spent some time touring a co-educational school and was particularly struck by a science lesson where the pupils were working in groups. The boys were busy measuring and weighing and the girls were standing to one side, clipboard and pen in hand, writing down the results!

There has been some publicity in the press in recent days stating that the number of girls' schools in the Good Schools Guide is declining. Maybe as a percentage of the schools contained in the guide, but what the press has chosen not to mention is that the number of schools featured in this publication has increased almost five fold in recent years. The actual number of top performing girls' schools has altered very little.

The Girls' Schools Association, representing around 200 of the leading girls' schools in the UK, St Mary's included, have responded as follows:

"We believe girls' schools give girls the mental and physical space to express themselves fully and grow in confidence. Far from being 'rarefied', today's girls' schools are 21st Century contemporary environments where sport, drama, science and innovative business and inter-school partnerships thrive. They prepare girls for the realities of life in the outside world while giving them the space they need to develop and mature."

And so say all of us!



Jean Ross
Headmistress