Gender bias in co-ed classrooms stops girls challenging gender stereotypes

Dr Mary Bousted, General Secretary of the United Kingdom’s Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL), believes that inherent sexism prevents girls from speaking up in co-educational classes and that this affects their academic performance and subject choices. Speaking at the recent ATL annual conference in Liverpool, Bousted, a former teacher, said that there was enormous pressure on girls at co-educational schools “to be thin, to be attractive, to be compliant and to be quiet” and not to appear “brainy” and “clever”. Girls, she said, are subjected to sexist bullying and feel under pressure to “keep quiet and to listen to the boys talking”.

Drawing on her own teaching experience, Bousted said that she once recorded the English lessons she gave at her London comprehensive school, thinking that the boys and girls contributed equally to her classes. She told the Guardian that when she listened back to the recording, it was clear that “the boys were talking and the girls were listening”. Bousted argues that sexist bullying and name calling results in girls lacking the confidence to challenge gender stereotypes and take on “difficult” subjects such as the traditionally male-dominated subjects of mathematics and physical sciences.

In response to Bousted’s comments, Natasha Devon MBE, the UK Department for Education’s mental health champion, wrote that in co-educational secondary schools “boys are far more likely to challenge the ideas I’m putting forward, whereas girls tend to wait until they are asked if they have any questions and then request further information, or for something to be repeated”. She continues:

I must confess that, until reading Dr Bousted’s piece, I’d never stopped to consider that there might be something wrong with this. I’d fallen into the trap of unconsciously pigeonholing girls as intuitively more empathetic and therefore better able to absorb the kinds of complicated emotional concepts we discuss in our classes. It didn’t occur to me that they might be itching to express an opinion but too constrained by what their peers might think of them to put their hands up. And that is chiefly, I have concluded, because I went to an all-girls school and so my own education was never tarnished by gender politics.

In other words, she says, “Mary Bousted is totally right”.

Mary Bousted’s and Natasha Devon’s comments are borne out by recent research. A 2015 report by the Institute of Physics (UK) found that co-educational schools need to do more to tackle sexist banter and attitudes that discourage girls from pursuing careers in science. The Opening Doors report found that many co-educational schools are "inadvertently reinforcing the notion that certain subjects were harder than others" and that girls "lack ability" and "innate talent" in certain subjects, and this is "particularly true for girls contemplating mathematics and the physical sciences". In addition, timetabling constraints in many co-educational schools reinforce gender stereotypes through offering subjects in blocks that send "a strong message about the types of courses that are taken by boys and girls".
In 2013 the Institute’s *Closing Doors* report examined existing gender imbalances in six A-level subjects which result in girls being more likely to take English, biology and psychology, and boys being more likely to take mathematics, physics and economics. The report found that 81% of government co-educational schools were either “maintaining or exacerbating the already poor gender bias of progression into these subjects”. One of the main findings of the report, however, was that “single-sex schools are significantly better than co-educational schools at countering gender imbalances in progression to these six subjects”.

Finally, in research published this year, Victoria Cribb and Dr Ann Haase from Bristol University found that girls in co-educational schools have lower self-esteem and are more likely to internalise “the thin ideal portrayed by the media” than girls in single-sex schools. They concluded that there is “preliminary support for the argument that the presence of the opposite sex may inflate appearance concerns and lower self-esteem” and that single-sex schools encourage “improved self-esteem, psychological and social wellbeing in adolescent girls”. Furthermore, they say, it is likely that in girls’ schools, “peer friendship groups and support from parents and friends may not be diluted by the effects of mixed gender, for example pressure to appear a certain way in front of boys”.

**References**


