Why a girls’ school?

It was a pleasure this week to celebrate the achievements of the girls across the year in a variety of arenas and it reinforced for me why I love and value the education of girls. Many of you would have heard recently of a school which has decided to go fully co-educational by 2022 and some of you may have read or heard about the debate that has been ignited by this announcement. Just what is better – single sex or co-educational schools? Now it is worth thinking about since I am in a school of 900 girls and no boys, proudly celebrating girls’ achievements across the year.

It’s interesting to look at the research and what it tells us about education and gender. There is the assumption that isolating girls and boys in their educational environments plays into gender stereotypes but what we see each day at school refutes that and, instead, mirrors the diversity evident in our community. When they enter this school each day the girls can be themselves, as glorious as that is. They can laugh, cry, yell out loud, work hard or run around and make a fool of themselves – in the playground, on the stage or at their carnivals. They don’t have to impress anyone; just learn how to be themselves. And while they are learning how to be themselves, they are in an environment that supports their growth, allows them to make mistakes and helps them fix them.

The National Coalition of Girls’ Schools in the USA released its paper “Steeped in Learning: The Student Experience at All-Girls’ Schools”1 this year and what they found after analysing the responses from 13,000 girls attending all-girls schools, co-ed independent schools and co-ed public schools was that girls at all-girls schools are more likely to have an experience that supports their learning than are girls in co-ed schools because

1. they have higher aspirations and are more motivated by their desire to succeed
2. their classes challenge them to achieve to their full academic potential
3. they engage more actively in the process of learning, especially in class discussions
4. they participate in activities that prepare them for the world outside of school, one in which they are able to connect ideas and link concepts
5. they feel more comfortable being themselves and expressing their ideas because they are in a culture of giving and receiving respect
6. they show greater gains on core academic and life skills, especially when confronted with challenging ideas
7. they feel more supported in their endeavours, especially in receiving more feedback.

In 2002 in the US there were about a dozen schools offering single-sex classes but by 2010 there were 540, of which 91 were all girls or all boys schools. In an all-girls’ school, girls are more likely to take a risk because, while they are growing, they know that it is safe to do so. Part of this comes about because of the way in which girls form friendship groups. These friendships enhance the confidence of young women and help in the formation of networks, allowing girls to feel more comfortable about taking a risk.

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1 NCGA “Steeped in Learning: The Student Experience at All-Girls Schools” 2016 [www.agsa.org](http://www.agsa.org)
Girls in single sex schools showed statistically significant improvement in both reading and mathematics and had better attendance rates.² Interestingly, at co-ed schools, if the number of girls in a class is increased, there is a positive impact on academic achievement for both boys and girls.³ There is also an increase in the amount of curriculum covered by the teacher.

In a report done on NAPLAN by the NSW Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation in 2014 it stated that there was significant academic advantage for both junior and senior secondary students in NSW single sex schools.⁴

So, where does that bring us? Well, we are certainly not going co-ed! We are very happy with who we are and what we are doing. We will not support the placement of girls in boys’ classes in order to moderate the behaviour of boys and help their results improve. What we will do is stay true to our commitment to educating girls because we believe that the world will be a stronger and gentler place because they are in it, educated, confident leaders of tomorrow’s world.

So we continue to celebrate our achievements and the achievements of our friends. This is a journey we are on and it’s not stopping.

Jane Curran
Principal

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² Bradley, Katherine PhD, Mercer University, 2009: “An investigation of single-sex education and its impact on academic achievement, discipline referral frequency, and attendance for first and second grade public school students” www.agsa.org
³ Cabezas, Veronica, PhD, Colombia University, 2010 “Gender peer effects in school: Does the gender of school peers affect student achievement?” www.agsa.org