

The Telegraph

'Clever girls clam-up in mixed schools,' says leading head

Girls are held back in co-ed schools, while single sex education lessens the pressure of an increasingly "sexualised society", leading heads have said

Email



Girls schools provide an environment where girls can be "confident" Photo: Alamy



By Josie Gurney-Read, Online Education Editor

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 30 Comments

Putting girls and boys in a mixed classroom can cause clever girls to “clam up”, a leading independent school head teacher has said.

Vivienne Durham, head at the all-girls Francis Holland School, has argued that teenage girls are held back in **coeducational schools**, particularly during the most formative teenage years.

She said that the risk of failure meant many girls felt “self-conscious” and unable to answer questions and simply “clammed-up” in a mixed sex environment.

Speaking at the Tatler Schools Live! conference in London, Ms Durham said girls must be taught to “enjoy mistakes” and that girls schools provide an environment where pupils could be “confident”.

“Girls like having the right answer,” she said. “If you’ve got a four year old daughter, even in this digital age, they hate going over the lines in colouring books. They hate it even more at 14, they hate risking, and they hate having the wrong answer.”

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“Boys and girls are struggling to cope with the pressures of a sexualised culture.”

Andrew Halls

She continued: “If you are any kind of teacher at all, you will know that the wrong answer is often the most interesting answer, since this is where learning begins.” Ms Durham, who has been head at Francis Holland School since 2004, added that, in mixed sex classrooms girls “don’t explore, they don’t risk” in case they have the wrong answer.

Her comments were echoed by Andrew Halls, head teacher at King’s College School, Wimbledon.

Mr Halls argued that there was a temptation to “caricature” boys and girls within co-ed schools, “regardless of the fact that many boys possess feminine characteristics and girls are just as adept at working against stereotypes. “



There is a temptation to "caricature" boys and girls within co-ed schools

Speaking in support of Ms Durham, Mr Halls said that teenage boys and girls were “struggling to cope” with the pressures of a “sexualised culture”, and that single sex education gave pupils the opportunity to be “normal”.

“Our teenagers spend hours every day on screens,” he said. “Too much of this time is spent looking at inappropriate material. Some of it is pornographic, some is video gaming tainted with violence and contempt for girls.”

He added that single sex education lessened the pressure to participate in “sexting” – sending sexually explicit images by text message – and took “some of the pressure off children worrying what they look like, and who fancies them.”

He said that, similar to girls, teenage boys felt less constrained in a single sex environment, with pupils “just as likely to play in the orchestra as in the rugby team, sing in an all boys choir as join the CCF.”

Their views follow recent praise for single sex education from both **Rhiannon Wilkinson, head of Wycombe Abbey in Buckinghamshire** and Tony Little, the headmaster of Eton, who said single-sex education allowed **pupils to keep their "innocence" until later in life.**

However, critics have said that single sex education does not adequately prepare pupils for modern life.

Currently only 10 per cent of boys and 16 per cent of girls are educated in single-sex schools.

Richard Cairns, head of Brighton College, said pupils in **co-ed schools were “at ease with one another” and “more at ease with themselves.”**