



# TAIERI COLLEGE

## CO-EDUCATION AT TAIERI COLLEGE

### INTRODUCTION

Taieri College is proudly and confidently coeducational.

At Taieri College the education of girls and boys together is seen as the healthiest, natural and normal setting for learning. It is one of the ways Taieri College recognises the equality of the sexes. We aim to provide a broad range of activities and experiences, tailored to meet the developmental needs of the widest possible range of individuals, whether they are boys or girls. Our programmes have our students learning in and through mixed gender experiences. Our students' achievements in all parts of the school's programmes are testimony to the success of our philosophies and practices.

All children are different and so are schools. The challenge for parents is to choose the school which they believe meets the needs of their particular children. No one school will necessarily meet all the educational needs of any particular students, nor will it necessarily meet all of the educational aspirations of every particular parent. Nevertheless, here at Taieri College, it is our aim to meet the development needs of each individual through a wide variety of programmes and opportunities. We focus on each student's individual needs rather than specifically on gender.

### COEDUCATION VERSUS SINGLE SEX – THE RESEARCH

In recent times there has been a generally held perception that girls are better off academically in single sex schools. Some have made claims that this is also true of boy's schools. In fact what the research tells us is quite at odds with these beliefs.

The misconceptions to do with girl's education are a combination of a number of factors. Part of the fault lies with coeducation schools who have assumed the arguments in favour of coeducation are so obvious there was no need to enter the debate. The biggest problem however has been to do with the quality of the research. Put bluntly, much of the research is now recognised as being inconclusive, invalid, political or biased. In the 1970's research was clearly in favour of coeducation for both sexes. In the 1980's however, research seemed to prove the opposite. Recent evaluation of the research in the 80's has produced a much clearer picture.

### **THE PROBLEMS WITH THE RESEARCH OF THE 1980'S WITH RESPECT TO GIRLS**

Research on the subject of coeducation has always been problematic because of the difficulty of isolating gender from the other differences between schools. Most research in Britain and Australia in the 1980s made comparisons between single sex independent girls schools which were socially and educationally selective and coeducational state or government schools which were open entry and therefore markedly different. To make such a comparison is clearly invalid given the demonstrated connections between socio-economic backgrounds and educational achievement.

Much of the research which appeared to support the superiority of single-sex private girl's school has been noted by scholars as being influenced by the high socio economic background of the students involved in the studies. For example Payne and Newton (1990) observe that the academic differences between co-educational and single sex schools may not be too surprising given that the latter, in many societies, forms a selective and prestigious minority (p68).

Jones (1991) concludes 'class and gender intersect' (p155). In fact the research supports his assertion that the biggest factor in the educational performance of girls is the educational qualifications of the girl's mother and/or the mother's educational aspirations for their daughters.

The issue is further confirmed by boys' achievement in external examinations. Girls have been doing better, regardless of their setting, or external qualifications for years. The issue here is of course boy's achievement rather than girls and while results seem to prove that the single sex environment is better academically, coeducational schools like Taieri College in fact have greater levels of overall achievement for both boys and girls.

All this is supported by the latest research in Australia. Without a doubt the leading researchers in the field of coeducation versus single sex education is Dr Judith Gill, Senior Lecturer in Education at the University of South Australia. She with several other researchers has revisited all the 1990s research and has reached a significant conclusion.

Once the factor of ability and socio-economic background are taken into account there is no empirical evidence to support the belief that in single sex schools girls do better than their counterparts in coeducation schools in terms of personal confidence or academic success, including the key subjects of maths, science and technology.

In fact the evidence proves it is the quality of the school which matters. The research only supports the understanding that there are good and bad schools, some of them single sex, some of them coeducation. Indeed neither single sex nor coeducational schools can claim girls will perform better academically in their setting. The issues the parents should use to distinguish school when choosing are whether the school provides self confidence, self esteem enjoyment of schooling and good social attitude when choosing a school.

## **WHAT ABOUT BOYS**

The research on boys education has been consistent right through the 1970's to the 1990's. All the conclusions are clear and unanimous. Boys perform better academically in coeducational setting especially those boys who are struggling academically. Boys also invariably report great enjoyment and higher self esteem in coeducational settings and assessments of their social attitudes indicate far fewer unacceptable sexist attitudes.

## **OTHER ISSUES**

### **Subject Enrolments**

Over the course of time coeducational schools have been accused of producing polarised course enrolments with more boys enrolling in science and mathematics type courses and girls taking humanities courses:

Here at Taieri College we pay particular attention to course selection. Staff at Taieri College monitors subject choices and all students are interviewed to ensure their choice leads on to a qualification and a career. The same information is given to both girls and boys.

The research does however support that girls and boys have different learning styles. Girls prefer an environment which is cooperative where boys are much more competitive. Again Taieri College acknowledges these differences.

It is a requirement of all the staff at Taieri College to recognise the difference in boys and girls learning styles and react accordingly. Staff are trained in different learning styles and are expected to adopt a wide range of methodologies. Because of this, we would argue that both boys and girls are benefiting from the learning styles of the other and in so doing our coeducational setting is broadening the learning styles of both genders.

### **CONFIDENCE AND SELF ESTEEM**

In terms of confidence and self esteem it is clear boys benefit from the coeducational setting. Where there is controversy is about girls' education.

A frequent claim of the supporters of single sex schooling for girls is that attendance at girls-only schools contributes to higher levels of self confidence and self esteem. No research has proved this.

What is clear is that girls in all educational settings demonstrate a drop in self esteem from Years 6 - 9 and tend to underestimate their abilities at this age. There can also be a tendency to form destructive social cliques at this stage of development. We are aware of this at Taieri College and our horizontal form system plus our Peer Mediation and Peer Support system are specially designed to deal with these issues.

## **HARASSMENT**

One of the major findings of the research is that the extremes of boys' behaviour are significantly moderated in a coeducational setting. Significantly, the research on girl's academic performance includes that it is **not** at the expense of girl's performance.

Again the controversy is centred on girls' education. Some people have claimed that the coeducational setting can place girls in a situation where they will be harassed by boys. However it should not be assumed that such experience is as a result of mixed schooling, no more than it is a result of mixes anywhere. Harassment unchecked is the fault of the school and is not an automatic consequence of coeducation.

Indeed, parents need to note that psychologists argue that non-physical but highly verbal victimisation associated with isolation tactics in some girls peer groups can be extremely harmful psychologically. Sadly this sort of harassment can take place in any school and indeed the desire to escape from such harassment is often asked by girls seeking to move from single sex schools to Taieri College.

Similarly the stereotype that in coeducational schools boys dominate the classroom and girls are passive and subservient belies an honest understanding of the realities of the coeducational setting. In all classrooms in any school, whether it is single sex or coeducational there are dominate personalities. In coeducational schools there are dominant girls and there are dominant boys. Equally there are passive girls and passive boys. As is any social setting, learning to recognise and respond to these differences in demeanour for both girls and boys is a part of normal growth and development and inappropriate excesses are more obvious in a coeducational setting.

Where parents have concerns for both boys and girls being appropriately prepared for social interaction at post-school age, there are great advantages in how students learn by interacting in a natural setting such as a coeducational school.

Parents need to be aware that girls are not helpless as the claim they would be dominated by boys, seems to imply. Girls are in fact a significant focus in our school in all its aspects, as leaders and as academic successes. For parents to support this claim is for them to demean their own daughters.

### **SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT**

There is a consistent message in all the research that both students and teachers perceive the coeducational environment as more pleasant and socially relaxed. (Schuder et al 1988, Payne and Newton 1989) Dale (1974) demonstrated that the average coeducational school was a happier community for both staff and students than the average single sex school, with less tension. Payne and Newton (1990) have commented in that students are generally reported as favouring coeducational schools and all several surveys reporting coeducational students are more likely to comment on the pleasant social climate or atmosphere of the schools. (p68)

### **SOCIAL ATTITUDES**

Research in this area is very sketchy. What exists supports the contention that single sex education, especially for boys, promotes the continuation of traditional sexist attitudes rather than breaking them down.

Kenway and Walker (1986) argue against single sex education from a perspective of social responsibility because boy's sexist attitudes are reinforced by their segregation. In the long run this clearly would be neither to society nor girls' or boys' benefit.

Coeducation by its family nature has the advantage that boys and girls receive the same opportunities, is especially within families and in so doing emphasises family unity. Anecdotal evidence also supports that boys and girls in coeducational settings are less likely to become involved in sexual relationships outside of school and are more likely to have a balanced attitude to these matters.

### **PREPARATION FOR TERTIARY STUDIES**

There is no substantial research which looks at the impact of single sex versus coeducational schools on a student preparation for tertiary studies. There does appear to be evidence that students in coeducational schools do better because the world of work and tertiary are entirely mixed sex. It could therefore be argued that coeducational settings would prepare girls better especially as it cannot be claimed that educational settings give girls any academic advantage.

### **THE OVERALL TREND**

In countries all over the world the vast majority of girls and boys are educated in coeducational settings. In fact single sex schools have only been a common practice in upper and middle class English education and systems derived from it or in settings where the segregation of girls is clearly for sexist reasons. In England, the 'home' of single sex education, there has been a substantial swing to coeducation and similarly in the United States a substantial number of so called 'elite' single sex schools have gone coeducational in the last decade. Even here in New Zealand there is a growing trend in the North Island for single sex schools to become coeducational at Year 13. A reflection, perhaps of their understanding that coeducation is better preparation for tertiary study and the world of work.

### **EDUCATION ISSUES FOR BOYS**

The research on coeducation versus single sex education for boys is clear in all areas; boys are better off in the coeducational setting in terms of academic achievement, confidence and self esteem, behaviour and enjoyment of the social environment. It can also be argued they will be less likely to adopt sexist attitudes and they are better prepared for tertiary studies.

The focus, however, on girl's education has perhaps overshadowed significant issues to do with boys education. The research show that boys, in whatever setting, are not doing as well as girls nor are they enjoying it as much. In particular boys are over-represented at the bottom end of the NCEA tables, and beyond school in the unemployment and crime figures. There are also serious issues to do with the health of adolescent boys, particularly in relation to substance abuse and risk taking behaviour.

It is up to all schools to address these issues. Because Taieri College is coeducational it does provide an advantage in terms of enjoyment and monitoring behaviour and attitudes. Our staff are also trained to deal with boys and their learning.

## **CONCLUSION**

The best evidence Taieri College can produce in relation of the value of coeducation for girls and boys is the testament of the students themselves. Surveys of students and their parents show an over 86% approval for all elements of Taieri College, including those aspects we would define as socialisation and safety. In particular each year we get many students transferring to us from single sex schools and this indicates their satisfaction at having done so. We have very few students going to single sex schools because they feel they cannot cope in a coeducational setting.

Our staff are especially trained to provide appropriate support for both genders as they pass through the various stages of emotional, social, intellectual and physical development.

We would strongly encourage parents who may have concerns about coeducation to speak to some of our students as well as the staff. Students will be able to provide first-hand commentary about the benefits, the effects, the opportunities, the challenges and their likes and dislikes in a completely open and honest way. Staff will equally be able to provide comment about the opportunities and issues which confront our young people and the approach we adopt to address them.

Below are some references to the research we refer to in the article and perhaps some reading you might like to undertake for yourself.

Biddulph S (1994) *Manhood* – Finch Publishing

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Gill J (1989) 'A Review of the Evidence on Single Sex Versus Coeducation Debate' and an Annotated Bibliography of the Research

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Jones J (1990) *Outcome of Girls School: Unravelling Some Differences* – *Australian Journal of Education* 34(2)

Kenway J & Willis S (1986) *Counting Sexism in the Single Way: a flawed proposition* in Porter P *Gender and Education*, Deakin University Australia

Marsh HW et al (1989) *From Single Sex to Coed Schools* in Leder G C

Sampson SU *Educating Girls*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney