



The pros and cons of single sex education

John Towers writes about the benefits of teaching boys and girls separately, and how their educational needs differ

The debate over the positives and negatives of single sex education is certainly not a new one. At the turn of the 20th century, the vast majority of educational establishments in Britain catered for just one gender. However, today single sex schools are more the exception than the rule with many formerly single sex establishments now welcoming pupils of both genders.

One school which has bucked the recent trend is Homefield Preparatory School in Sutton, Surrey. Since its inception in 1870, Homefield has always been an all-boys school and its headmaster, Mr John Towers, is a strong advocate of the benefits in keeping the school that way.

“Boys and girls tend to have very different developmental needs,” he said, “and so, I believe, it's beneficial for educational provision to match

this differential. We have known this for many years and research in education and neuroscience now presents us with ever more depth to the application of this understanding.”

Those with any experience in the educational sphere will agree that boys and girls develop in very different ways at school, both academically and socially. For example, research has shown that boys' active attention spans can be significantly shorter than those of girls. A single sex school like Homefield allows the teachers greater scope to work sympathetically to boys' specific requirements and tailor their lesson designs to allow the boys very regular breaks in concentration. Homefield is very forward thinking and proactive in this area, allowing for 'brain breaks' and 'energisers' to ensure their boys remain focused and attentive throughout the day.

It is hard to avoid the now annual national headlines regarding underachievement of boys, especially when they start school. Government figures demonstrate that girls continue to lead the way in all early learning goals, with 74.3% achieving the expected level of development compared with 58.6% of boys. In stark comparison, Homefield has demonstrated impressive results. Literacy and mathematics remain the subjects in which fewest boys achieve the expected level or higher nationally. However, by the end of reception at Homefield the picture is very different with 94% of boys achieving the expected level or higher in literacy and 87% in mathematics.

Another notion that is supported by much recent research is that boys are likely to lag behind girls in the arts but tend to progress more quickly in mathematics and sciences. Whilst

there are, of course, exceptions to this rule in any school, Homefield has taken deliberate action to balance things out. John explains: "We have made adjustments in our timetabling, focusing on reading comprehension and, most importantly, our approach to developing boys' writing from a young age."

The all-boys environment also provides a safe setting for boys to pursue and excel in subjects which are traditionally considered more 'feminine', without feeling the pressure to conform to what is considered 'normal' for young boys.

One of the greatest benefits of an all-boys school, in John's opinion, is the nurturing of leadership. Competition is so important amongst boys and it is crucial, particularly at the ages of 11-13, that it is harnessed broadly. A competitive, but spirited, environment, which inevitably develops in a male-dominated arena, allows boys to get past the cognitive and confidence barrier, which many 10-11 year old boys hit, including in areas like literacy.

Homefield's broad offering of extra-curricular activities allows its boys to grow in confidence and develop leadership skills, which will prove of huge benefit when they graduate to their senior schools of choice. This is not to say that a mixed school wouldn't provide similar opportunities, but the unique challenges of a competitive, masculine environment tend to encourage young men to step up and lead their peers from the front.

"Leadership is massive for us," John stated. "It needs to be brought on really early with boys and our teaching staff constantly reinforce the importance of good grace and responsibility. Democratic systems and the expectation of duty grow as boys come through the school and they tend to regulate themselves really well. Our general approach is to ensure balance with a lot of purposeful activity, both mental and physical. We ensure competition at varied levels - both against oneself in terms of 'personal bests' and in terms

of target setting within a team to develop collaboration and camaraderie and also traditional competition, particularly on the sports field."

However, this is not to say that there is any sort of 'survival of the fittest' culture at Homefield or other all-boys schools. John is very keen to promote inclusivity wherever possible. "Not every boy is an 'A-team' standard rugby player, so our 'C-Team' also gets to play really stimulating league fixtures and benefits from top class coaching.

"Furthermore, competition is not just cultural, it can be cerebral. For example, I am exceptionally proud of our chess players who compete (and enjoy huge success) at county, national and even international levels. We aim to give our boys the chance to develop and excel across the board and, as such, it is not surprising that we see our boys being awarded as many arts, drama and sports scholarships as academic ones," he said.

One of the greatest challenges for John as headmaster, and also one that which stimulates him most, is the responsibility of nurturing the boys under his guidance with a specific pastoral programme. Young men in Britain are growing up today in a world dominated by the strong influence of social media, which can present a real challenge in terms of poor role models and negative peer pressure. Some might argue that young men who have grown up without much feminine input in their lives might not be as rounded or culturally balanced as those who went to a co-educational school. John certainly appreciates this point of view and is well aware of the very good reasons for it. However, there are ways that this can be nullified.

"Our pastoral care and school ethos provide the fine balance of warmth and care together with guidance and boundaries that are crucial in creating well-rounded young men. Boys respond well to the codification of good manners, to ethics, and to explicit support in order to make their way through new media with confidence and poise to become fine young men. We ensure that there

is enough time and space in the curriculum to equip our boys with a real sense of what it is to be a civic citizen, to be respectful and to be dignified. Whilst we are an all-boys establishment, we can still have some levity and our regular collaborations with the local all-girls school, such as discos, are a strong feature of our social calendar."

Many Homefield parents do recognise the benefits of co-educational schools, particularly in the teenage years, and so a lot of the boys do go on to senior schools with, for example, a co-educational sixth form. The benefits of co-education at this later stage, for example better preparing students for university and work, are well known. However, at least for Homefield parents, this foundation, from 3-13, in a boy's most formative years, provides them with a setting which really fits.

Homefield is renowned for its family atmosphere, small class sizes, and fulfilment of individual potential and academic success. The school establishes a safe and happy environment, with a real depth of specialist teaching. Staff work hard to cultivate boys personal interests and passions; whether they are artistic, linguistic, sporting or social.

www.homefield.sutton.sch.uk

John Towers was recently made a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts (RSA). He was formerly Director of Education at the Reach to Teach charity in India, delivering high quality education to thousands of children in severely disadvantaged areas across the country. He remains a trustee of the charity to this day. Having taken over as Headmaster of Homefield Preparatory School in 2014, John now has plans to transform the school into a coaching hub for other schools and academies in London by using a combination of creativity and inclusivity that is at the core of the RSA's ethos. The hub would share educational best practice and help to significantly improve the levels of teaching delivered to children in the area.