

## ***In an increasingly integrated world, what is the value of all-girls' education?***

***By Dr Gareth Lloyd, Head of Malvern St James Girls' School***

In a nutshell, all girls' education puts girls front and centre of everything we do – academic, pastoral and extra-curricular – and allows them to take control, free of judgement and stereotype.

“Hmmm”, you might say, “he would say this, wouldn't he?”. So let me back this up with data from the growing body of evidence supporting how girls now outperform boys in attainment at every educational stage from primary onwards. This means that they achieve better GCSE results, better A Level results and more first-class degrees than their male counterparts. Go girls!

This achievement gap is even more pronounced in all-girls' schools than it is for girls in co-educational ones. It is incontrovertible that we are doing something right, and *that something* is allowing girls to achieve their personal best. It's giving them the grades that facilitate entry to the most prized courses at the most prestigious universities and setting them up for successful, fulfilling lives and careers.

Of course, it's not just about academics, but let's use this as our starting point because we all know that what we really want – and expect from a school like MSJ – is excellent examination grades which facilitate futures.

**Fact 1<sup>1</sup>:** STEM subjects at A Level attract greater numbers of pupils in an all-girls' setting.

Girls are more than twice as likely to take Physics and Further Mathematics in a girls' school than a co-educational one (4.67% compared to 10.52% per cent, and 5.8% compared to 2.18% respectively).

They are 85% more likely to take Chemistry and 40% more likely to take Biology.

The number of girls taking Computer Science in girls' schools has doubled versus a 68% increase in co-ed schools.

Over 70% of undergraduate degrees in the UK are STEM-related. Research by STEM Women in 2021, with data from UCAS, showed that only 35% of STEM students in higher education in the UK are women (though for MSJ, the number of A Level leavers each year who go on to study STEM is around 50%+).

**Fact 2<sup>1</sup>:** KS5 (A Level) analysis shows that in single-sex schools, girls continue to outperform those in co-educational schools across all subjects. This applies across all schools (state and independent) as well as in the independent sector alone.

The average point score expressed as a grade for all students in all co-educational schools is B - whilst for girls in all girls' schools it is B +.

**Fact 3<sup>1</sup>:** At GCSE Level (Key Stage 4), girls perform better in girls' schools. The so-called Attainment 8 scores show that girls achieve 57.2 in all subjects in girls' schools against 49.6 in co-educational schools (out of a maximum possible 90). In the core subjects of English they achieved 11.9 (out of a

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<sup>1</sup> Department for Education KS5 (A Level) data for 2021-22

maximum possible 18) in single sex versus 10.7 in co-ed; and in Mathematics 10.1 (out of a maximum possible 18) versus 9 respectively.

**Fact 4<sup>1</sup>:** UK-wide data analysed by Cambridge University Press and Assessment has shown that nationally the outlier subject in this trend for girls outperforming boys is Mathematics, with boys' attainment outstripping girls from the early years through to A Levels. *However*, it is worth pointing out that at MSJ, even this trend is bucked. As just one example, at GCSE level in 2023, nationally 18.4% of boys and 16.6% of girls nationally achieved the top grades of 7-9 in Maths. At MSJ, 49% of girls achieved these grades. 60% of that cohort then went on to study Maths at A Level.

So we can see that girls are able to fly academically in an all-girls' environment. Why is this? Certainly, it is partially down to non-genderisation of subjects, but there is more at play, too. Take teaching styles: girls learn in a different way to boys, and having single sex classes means teachers can really focus on the most effective methodology *for girls*. Typically, this will involve more collaboration and communication as well as independent study.

There is also less distraction. Girls don't have to think about how they are looking that day and how they might be perceived under the male gaze. They can just be themselves in a totally un-self-conscious and liberating way. This allows them to focus fully on the importance of academics in class and appropriate social interaction outside of the classroom.

And so we come to sisterhood. What I see at MSJ is the power of positive role models and female leadership at all levels of the school. Leadership positions are filled by females, from our Prep Council Reps, through to our Subject Ambassadors, Sixth Form Prefects, Ships Captains and Head Girl team, right up to the top with our Chair of Governors. Younger girls learn from older girls and enjoy doing so. From the youngest through to the oldest, girls in a single-sex setting are more likely to take female equality as an important issue and Sixth Formers are more likely to feel positive about their futures.<sup>2</sup>

Take that one step further, and our girls have our MSJ alumnae to look up to – that's an amazing group of some of the most remarkable women, from the Chair of HSBC UK, the UK's Attorney General and the CEO of OfCom, to best-selling authors and award-winning journalists, the first female African architect to win the RIBA Gold medal and the CFO of Burberry (formerly McLaren and TalkTalk). Some of the most plum jobs and achievements, and not a man in sight!

There is so much more besides. Research into mental toughness by the Girls Schools' Association (GSA) shows that girls in GSA schools (of which MSJ is a member) generally possess higher mental toughness scores than those in co-educational settings, particularly for emotional control, and confidence in both their abilities and their inter-personal skills. Both ambition and positivity are linked to this greater confidence, and it gives girls the drive to succeed and the security to take risks without fear of failure.

Sometimes you may find detractors of single-sex education trying to make an argument that all-girls is anachronistic and an artificial environment that leaves girls feeling overwhelmed when they enter the mixed-sex environment of university and the workplace. But this just isn't the case: that confidence we just spoke of is exactly what gives them their voice, the articulacy and communication skills to work effectively with anyone, regardless of sex or any other characteristic.

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<sup>2</sup> Girls' School Day Trust

Added to that are other ways that girls' schools incorporate appropriate co-educational activity to our settings in a meaningful, purposeful way. Here at MSJ, our enrichment programme will allow girls to carry out projects with boys' schools so that they have the opportunity to work with them where they wish to and where it doesn't compromise the overall teaching and learning experience.

I could continue with so many more reasons why single-sex education is a powerful, facilitating and empowering environment for girls. From diversity and inclusion to wellbeing, participation in competitive Sport, to dealing with growing up in a changing world, *everything* here is made relevant to the female experience.

Perhaps there now remains just one elephant in the room. And by that I mean *me*. I know some may find it controversial to have a male Head in an all-girls' school, particularly after all that talk of female empowerment and leadership. But I would like to assure you as the father of a daughter and the brother of three sisters – strong, independent-minded, ambitious women, all – I consider myself a true feminist and an ardent advocate for women. I know the barriers women face, even now and even though I have never had to justify my capability on the basis of my gender, nor declare if or when I want to have children, nor explain how I might manage childcare.

No question, I am - and shall always be - a life-long champion of women.

If you want to find out more about how all-girls' education serves girls and gives them a competitive edge, as well as creating a happy and balanced environment, please do come and see for yourself with a school tour on one of our forthcoming Open Days or for an individual tour and taster day(s).