



## From History to Western Standards: The Effect of Single-Gender Education on School Success

Jani Sota

Assoc. Prof. Dr.,  
University "Aleksandër Moisiu" Durrës,  
Durrës, Albania

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### Abstract

*This article examines the development and role of single-gender education from a historical perspective, analyzing its impact on students' academic performance and its contribution to the formation of Western civilization. Research and historical accounts of education indicate that single-gender schools have provided a specialized learning environment where academic and social skills can be cultivated in a focused manner, minimizing distractions associated with gender mixing. The article explores different historical periods of education, from traditional institutions to modern schools, analyzing changes in teaching methods and pedagogical strategies that have influenced high academic achievement. A particular section of the study focuses on the connection between single-gender education and the values of Western civilization, including the development of critical thinking, intellectual discipline, a culture of dialogue, and active civic participation. The article compares student performance in single-gender and coeducational schools, highlighting factors that influence academic success and the development of social and cultural skills necessary for civic engagement and societal development. In conclusion, the study emphasizes the historical, pedagogical, and cultural significance of single-gender education, showing that this model has contributed not only to improved academic performance but also to preparing individuals to integrate the values and skills that characterize Western civilization.*

**Keywords:** Single-gender education; academic performance; history of education;  
Western civilization; pedagogical methods; academic development; civic skills

### 1. Introduction

The debate over the most appropriate forms of organizing school education has accompanied the development of educational systems since the early stages of formal education institutionalization. Among the most discussed issues, particularly over the past two centuries, is single-sex education, which has experienced extended periods of dominance, significant decline, and, more recently, a contentious resurgence within the context of contemporary educational reforms. Single-sex education, defined as the organization of the teaching process in classes or institutions separated by gender, is not a novel phenomenon but a historically consolidated practice shaped by cultural, social, religious, and political factors [Sota, 2024].

Historically, single-sex schooling has been the dominant form of education, particularly in secondary and higher education, until the late 19th century. In Western societies, this model was primarily built on the principle of excluding girls from formal education, reserving learning opportunities for boys, whereas in certain Eastern and Islamic cultures, the education of girls was recognized as a natural and universal right. However, the social and ideological developments of the 19th and 20th centuries - particularly feminist movements, the process of secularization, and the expansion of mass

education - led to the institutionalization of coeducational schools, which came to be perceived as an expression of gender equality and social progress.

In this context, coeducation emerged as the dominant standard, particularly within public education systems, while single-sex education remained largely associated with private or religious institutions. However, in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, a renewed interest in single-sex schools was observed, especially in the United States and in several other countries with developed educational systems. This resurgence was driven by growing concerns over declining academic performance, disciplinary issues, gender disparities in educational attainment, as well as neuroscientific studies highlighting structural and functional differences in brain development between genders.

At the core of this contemporary debate lies the fundamental question of whether gender-segregated education constitutes an effective mechanism for enhancing academic success and improving the social and academic well-being of students, or whether it reinforces gender stereotypes and undermines the principle of equality. Proponents of single-sex education argue that segregated environments allow teachers to tailor instructional methods to the distinct learning styles of girls and boys, reduce distractions, improve discipline, and enhance students' self-confidence. Conversely, critics of this approach view single-sex education as regressive, selective, and potentially discriminatory, questioning the scientific validity of studies reporting academic benefits.

This article aims to analyze the impact of single-sex education on academic achievement by examining this phenomenon from both historical and contemporary perspectives, drawing on empirical studies, institutional reports, and comparative analyses of educational practices, primarily in the United States and other developed countries. The analysis focuses on the influence of this educational model on academic performance, school discipline, students' socio-emotional development, and perceptions of gender equality in education.

Through this approach, the study seeks to contribute to the enrichment of the scholarly debate on single-sex education by offering a balanced perspective between supporting and opposing arguments, while also reflecting on the potential adaptation of this model to contemporary Western standards of inclusive and high-quality education.

## **2. Methodology of the Study**

This study is grounded in a combined methodological approach that integrates historical analysis, comparative analysis, and a critical review of contemporary empirical literature on single-sex education. Given that the subject under examination encompasses both a long-term historical development and direct implications for modern educational policies, the methodology is constructed upon an interdisciplinary framework that interweaves the history of education, pedagogy, developmental psychology, and public policy analysis.

At the historical level, the study employs the historical-analytical method to examine the evolution of single-sex education from traditional institutions to modern educational systems. For this purpose, historical sources and specialized studies have been analyzed, including the works of George Makdisi on Islamic educational institutions, as well as the studies of Jani Sota on the history of education in Western civilization. This method enables the phenomenon to be situated within the broader cultural and institutional developments of Western civilization.

At the contemporary level, the study applies a systematic literature review, examining empirical studies, institutional reports, and meta-analyses conducted primarily in the United States and other countries with well-established educational systems. Key references include reports issued by the U.S. Department of Education on single-sex schooling, the works of Leonard Sax on gender differences in learning, and the analyses of Valerie E. Lee and Helen M. Marks on academic performance in single-sex and coeducational schools.

The comparative method is employed to analyze differences in academic achievement, school discipline, and students' socio-emotional development between two organizational models: single-sex schools and coeducational schools. This comparison is supported by official statistical data, federal reports, and longitudinal studies, including those published by the National Center for Education Statistics in the United States.

In addition to the quantitative analysis of reported data in the literature, the study adopts a qualitative interpretative approach by examining both supportive and critical arguments concerning single-sex education within academic and public discourse. This approach allows for the identification of mediating factors influencing the success or limitations of this model, such as teaching quality, socio-economic context, institutional culture, and educational policies.

From an epistemological perspective, the study is informed by a pragmatic paradigm that seeks to evaluate the effectiveness of single-sex education not in ideological terms, but on the basis of empirical evidence and measurable outcomes. The balanced integration of historical inquiry and contemporary data analysis aims to avoid normative positioning and to provide an objective interpretation of the phenomenon.

In conclusion, the methodology adopted in this study enables a comprehensive and multidimensional examination of single-sex education, situating it simultaneously within the historical trajectory of Western civilization and within the contemporary debate on quality, equity, and effectiveness in educational systems.

### 3. Single-Sex Education in Historical and Institutional Perspective

Can one imagine entering a school and finding only girls or only boys? This was the reality of single-sex schools, entirely normal until the late 19th century, when it was a common practice in education, particularly in secondary and higher levels, as a characteristic of the traditional old-school model. In fact, in the Western world, males were the only ones with broad access to schooling, even though in many countries organized education was limited and not widely available to most children, especially girls [Sota, 2024].

The situation was different in the East. Women in ancient India, for instance, enjoyed a high social status, and among them were many renowned intellectuals. The *Rig Veda* mentions the names of female poets, and by 800 BCE, several learned women are also referenced in the *Upanishads* [Ibid]. In medieval Islamic countries, the education of girls was considered a universal human right. The first Quranic command, "Read...", applied equally to boys and girls, who were not only educated but also became founders of universities of that era. One of the oldest universities in the world was founded in Morocco in 859 by Fatima al-Fihri, a Muslim woman. It began as a mosque with a school and gradually developed into a center of higher education.

The University of Al-Qarawiyyin, founded in 859 in Fez, Morocco, by Fatima al-Fihri, is considered one of the oldest institutions of higher education in the Islamic world and beyond. Initially organized as a mosque with an educational function, it developed over the centuries into an important center of study for Islamic theology, jurisprudence, linguistics, philosophy, and the natural sciences. According to UNESCO and Guinness World Records, Al-Qarawiyyin is recognized as the oldest continuously operating institution of higher learning in the world. [Makdisi, 1981].

The first schools established in America by Puritan colonists were modeled after schools in England, which were not necessarily single-sex but were primarily designed for the education of white, Christian males [Chen, 2022 May 20]. Although few in number, feminist movements made it possible to open educational institutions for girls, who had until then been considered inferior to boys. The "Seven Sisters Colleges" and "Salem College" (North Carolina) were the first single-sex schools for girls in America, founded in 1772 [Ibid], followed by the first medical institutions, the "Female Medical College" in New England (1848) and the "Woman's Medical College" in Pennsylvania (1850). These institutions offered women an opportunity for education at a time when access to conventional educational institutions had been denied to them, as had previously occurred in Switzerland. The nineteenth century brought modern ideas that framed education as a right rather than a privilege reserved for a small elite. The rise of secularization in the twentieth century significantly contributed to the adoption of coeducational schools, which operated depending on the religious, social, and financial conditions of specific regions.

Although coeducational schools emerged in America in the 18th century, becoming more prominent after the Revolutionary War (1763-1783), girls' participation remained limited until 1918, when laws were enacted requiring primary school-age students to attend school [Sota, 2024]. By the 1970s, public single-sex schools eligible for federal funding could operate as long as they offered parallel classes for both genders or coeducational classes. Furthermore, such schools had to meet several conditions and criteria: each single-sex class had to be based on a significant educational objective, the objectives had to be implemented equally, student enrollment in a single-sex class had to be entirely voluntary, and equivalent single-sex parallel classes had to be provided [Norfleet, 2003].

The issue fundamentally changed in 1972, when the United States enacted the Education Amendments, specifically Title IX, which clarified and modified the rules concerning schools, classes, and extracurricular activities in public elementary and secondary schools [New York Times Magazine, 2008]. This milestone was largely due to feminist groups, who argued that it would prevent "discrimination" on the basis of gender in educational programs and activities in federally funded public schools [Zernike, 2006 October 25]. As a result, single-sex public schools were closed or began integrating coeducational programs, leaving only private and religious institutions as the dominant providers of single-sex education in the United States.

### 4. The Effect of Single-Sex Education on Academic Achievement: Debates, Evidence, and Controversies

Public coeducational schools faced various disciplinary issues and low academic performance. In the 1990s, the "American Association of University Women" released a report titled *Shortchanging Girls, Shortchanging America*, which

raised public awareness about the underachievement of girls in mathematics and science in coeducational classrooms. Similar evidence emerged from the study conducted by the *National Association for Single-Sex Public Education* in June 2005, originating from Cambridge University [Sax, 2008]. Public attention also began to shift toward how boys were underperforming and struggling in public coeducational schools, and how they lagged behind girls in graduation rates, both at the secondary school and college levels. *The New York Times Magazine* published a report indicating that the brains of boys and girls attending single-sex classes developed more positively, providing further arguments for why the education system needed to evolve differently from the traditional coeducational model [New York Times Magazine, 2008].

The 1996 Supreme Court decision took into account appeals regarding the authorization of single-sex schools. Subsequently, in 2001, the *No Child Left Behind Act*, aimed at reforming the educational system, declared that single-sex education could receive federal education funding, while leaving the details to be developed in regulations. These regulations were issued in 2006, clarifying the conditions for providing single-sex classes and extracurricular activities [Ibid]. This development reflected growing concern, advocacy, and demand for such single-sex schools. The Act authorized local school districts to use federal funds for "innovative assistance programs", including fully single-sex public schools or single-sex classroom programs [Chen, 2023 May 24]. Thanks to these reforms, the number of public single-sex schools in the United States increased significantly.

The number of parents seeking voluntary single-sex education for their children indicated that this movement was likely to continue growing. They did not wait for lengthy studies or debates; they were convinced that a single-sex educational environment would provide their children with better opportunities for success.

Parents, teachers, and students in Greene County School District, Georgia (USA), were surprised to learn that their schools were embracing single-sex education on a large scale. The school board unanimously decided that, starting in the fall of 2008, all classes in all district schools would be single-sex [U.S. Department of Education, *National Center for Education Statistics*. 2017]. This measure was taken to address significant challenges faced by this rural school district, such as low test scores, rising dropout rates, student arrests, and teenage pregnancies. The district ranked 332nd, significantly below Georgia's average of 369. According to the plan, girls and boys in grades 7 through 12 would attend separate classes [Ibid]. Greene County became the first entire school district in the United States to convert fully to single-sex education [Ibid].

In the same year (2008), the first public single-sex school opened in Hartford, Connecticut. According to *The New York Times*, this initiative significantly impacted coeducational public schools and provided a controversial approach to addressing disciplinary issues and improving the extremely low graduation rates. Educators justified this decision as a response to existing gaps, the need to reduce distractions, and the goal of enhancing the very low educational performance levels. *The New York Times* reported that 48 public schools with single-sex classes were operating, representing an increase of more than 200 percent compared to 1995, when the entire country had only two public single-sex schools [National Association for Single-Sex Public Education (NASSP), 2005].

These initiatives were met with mixed reactions, both in favor and against. While one side was optimistic that the change would improve the performance of both girls and boys, the other side was outraged, even threatening to withdraw from the district.

Nevertheless, single-sex schools spread across the country. According to federal data from the National Center for Education Research for the 2014-2015 school year, there were 283 public single-sex schools in the United States, with Texas and Florida leading with 29 each. By 2017, more than 1,000 such public single-sex schools were in operation, excluding juvenile schools, alternative schools, special education institutions, and vocational schools. According to this analysis, only seven states lacked such public schools. Federal data analysis from the National Center for Education Research on November 2, 2017, indicated that 75 percent of public single-sex schools were located in urban and rural areas, while only 12 percent were in suburban regions [Science Daily, 2012]. Out of the 283 schools, 170 were for boys and 113 for girls; however, girls outnumbered boys enrolled in these public schools: 21,000 compared to 17,000 [Ibid].

A study involving 4,944 students found that 39 percent of those attending single-sex schools experienced fewer issues related to staff shortages, higher student-teacher ratios, and increased levels of parental involvement. Similar results were reported by a government-sponsored study in the United States in 2008, which outlined the benefits of public single-sex schools: reducing sexual harassment among students, decreasing gender biases in teacher-student interactions, fostering a sense of comfort between students and staff, lowering behavioral problems, improving students' self-esteem, enhancing academic achievement, providing greater leadership opportunities, and offering increased avenues for social and moral guidance [Younger & Warrington, 2005].

The two opposing "camps" regarding single-sex schools attempted to present their facts and counter-facts on the

advantages and disadvantages of such institutions. According to the first camp, the theory of single-sex education, for both boys and girls, proved to be positive due to current differences and the way their brains function. When students are in separate classes, teachers can tailor their teaching methods to capitalize on the specific learning techniques of boys and girls. For example, girls tend to prefer collaborative work, whereas boys are more motivated by competition. Furthermore, students are not constantly distracted by members of the opposite sex, nor influenced by their clothing or behaviors, as data show that adolescent boys are more easily distracted than girls in coeducational settings [*American Association of University Women (AAUW), 2015*]. An analysis conducted in England explained this as follows: "There is a viewpoint that girls, if boys are around, will focus only on them and not on their lessons, and if boys have girls around, they will do the same ..." [*Chen, 2023 May 24*].

The Chicago Urban Preparatory Academy proudly reported some remarkable statistics regarding the improvement of single-sex classes in a public school in one of the city's neighborhoods. In 2006, the first year of its opening, the participating students had a dismal reading level of only 4 percent [*New York Times Magazine, 2008*]. By the time the school was converted to a single-sex model and the students graduated four years later, 100 percent of them were admitted to colleges or universities, and many were offered academic scholarships [*McGrath, & Sammons, 2011*]. Although other factors may have contributed to this improvement, the outcome was nonetheless positive. This was also confirmed by the 2023 school report, which highlighted positive results from the experience at Jefferson High School in Illinois, where after only half a semester of voluntary single-sex classes for 7th and 8th grades, higher grades, better attendance, and fewer disciplinary problems were reported for all students. Moreover, girls showed significant improvement in science and mathematics, while boys improved in reading and writing [*Gaucher & Hafer & Kay & Davidenko, 2010*].

Tom Carroll, chairman and founder of the "Brighter Choice Charter School for Boys" and the "Brighter Choice Charter School for Girls" in Albany, states that recently published test results from single-sex classrooms demonstrated significantly better performance compared to coeducational classes [*Chen, 2023 March 27*]. Similar outcomes were observed in Ireland in 2018, where a high percentage of students in single-sex secondary schools showed surprisingly high achievements in science, literature, and arts, compared to their peers in coeducational classes [*Hurry & Fridkin & Holliman, 2022*].

Michael Gurian and Kathy Stevens, in their study "*With Boys And Girls In Mind*" published in *Educational Leadership* (2004), discuss how single-sex classrooms facilitate teachers in preparing lessons tailored to students' needs and foster closer teacher-student relationships. According to their findings, while boys learn more effectively through physical activities, girls tend to prefer interactions and discussions. The study notes that "new PET and MRI scanning technologies reveal structural and functional differences in the brains of boys and girls. With more cortical areas dedicated to verbal functioning, sensory memory, sitting posture, listening, tonal perception, and reflective thinking, reading and writing complexities are easier for the female brain. Boys, who often bypass reflective thinking, require rest periods to recharge and engage more cortical areas for spatial-mechanical functioning" [*Jackson, & Smith, 2000*].

There is another reason why researchers consider single-sex classrooms to be necessary and effective. A 2007 study, led by a team of scientists from the National Institute of Mental Health, identified an interesting phenomenon related to brain development in children. Using 829 brain scans collected over two years from 387 subjects aged 3 to 27, the researchers found several remarkable differences [*Sax, 2008*]. For instance, the occipital lobe, which is primarily associated with visual processing, shows rapid development in girls between ages 6 and 10, while in boys it develops after age 14. Other studies have also demonstrated disparities in language processing between genders, concluding that the language areas of the brain in many 5-year-old boys resemble those of many 3-year-old girls [*Menghini, & Finzi, & Carlesimo, & Vicari, 2011*].

A similar evidence has been presented by Phd. Carol Dweck from Stanford University in her research. According to her, different gender-based mindsets allow for positive outcomes only in single-sex classrooms. Teachers can employ distinct instructional strategies for girls and for boys, but this possibility is feasible only in single-sex settings, as specific performance needs require gender-specific approaches. As a result: "Single-sex schools create more relaxed environments, with fewer gender stereotypes, and provide better-aligned opportunities for students' interests" [*The 74, 2022 January 31*]. The rationale behind this is that boys and girls are neurologically different and learn in significantly different ways. According to the study *How The Brain Learns: New and Exciting Findings*, presented at the ASAIHL conference, boys develop visual, spatial, and temporal skills faster than girls, whereas in Singapore in 2014, Phd. Sousa argued that girls acquire spoken language skills earlier than boys [*Singh, & Ma, 2014*]. In a single-sex classroom, girls can explore their abilities at their own pace without needing to compete with boys, and vice versa.

Phd. Leonard Sax, in his book *Girls on the Edge*, highlighted "that single-sex education has proven successful in

broadening students' horizons and encouraging them to explore their tendencies and interests without feeling constrained by gender stereotypes" [Sax, 2020]. Furthermore, as psychologist Phd. Lisa Damour notes, "students appear much more focused in school; they are not distracted by a cute boy in the hallway and do not worry about how they look or what they are wearing" [Martínez Besteiro, & Julián Quintanilla, 2017]. Similarly, a 2003 study conducted by the University of Virginia, led by Phd. Abigail Norfleet James, found that in single-sex classrooms, boys were twice as likely to pursue interests in subjects such as art, music, drama, and foreign languages compared to those attending coeducational schools [Norfleet James, A. 2003].

Opponents naturally hold contrasting views. They consider the evidence supporting the advantages of single-sex schools as inconsistent and unclear, presenting their own "evidence" which often finds no significant differences. Moreover, research in this field tends to focus on a small number of locations, given that in most countries single-sex schools are selective and attended by a limited number of students [U.S. Department of Education, 2008]. According to critics, single-sex classrooms are "gender-specific policies" that may become problematic when the need arises for integration rather than separation, since "learning exclusively with peers of the same sex may pose difficulties when students must interact with the opposite gender" [Jauregui, & Goienetxe, & Vidales, 2017]. They argue that purported academic benefits are overstated. Single-sex education may take a step backward, reinforcing gender stereotypes and potentially leading to inequality in the workplace, undermining the progress achieved by feminist movements [Sax, 2010]. Separate classrooms, they contend, may hinder students not only in their professional careers but also in their personal adult lives. A study titled "Sex segregation in schools detrimental to equality", published in *Science Daily*, claims that "such separations do not socialize students to be less sexist" [National Academy of Sciences, 2011 June 23]. In this context, *Science* magazine cites psychologists and educators who dismiss the purported benefits of single-sex education, asserting that such institutions encourage sexism, which "impedes a positive learning environment" [Ibid]. This debate also encompasses "strong evidence of the negative consequences of gender segregation" and the "collateral harm" caused by such separation. Civil rights organizations have even argued that single-sex education is unconstitutional and have filed lawsuits against schools that offer this option.

The issue of single-sex education remains controversial for many Americans, as the number of such schools is still relatively small. Nevertheless, the trend toward single-sex education continues, along with ongoing debates about whether it represents the best approach to educating children. Today, single-sex education is more widespread in English-speaking countries such as Malaysia, England, Hong Kong, South Africa, and Australia, where it is primarily associated with the private sector. It is also present in Muslim countries, where both public and private schools are segregated by gender. Recently, there has been a significant expansion in countries such as Chile, Ireland, Israel, and Singapore. In Thailand, Trinidad, and Tobago, single-sex schools tend to attract wealthier female students [Zajda, & Rust, & Majhanovich, 2006]. The question remains open: "Why do single-sex schools produce better outcomes?" and "Should our institutions follow this model of success?"

## 5. Conclusions

The analysis of the historical and contemporary development of single-sex education, along with a comprehensive review of empirical studies and institutional reports, demonstrates that this educational model represents a complex and multidimensional phenomenon that cannot be evaluated unilaterally. Single-sex education is neither a universal solution to the problems of educational systems nor an outdated practice devoid of pedagogical value. On the contrary, it emerges as a didactic alternative that, under certain conditions, can positively influence academic achievement, scholarly development, and the socio-emotional well-being of students.

The data presented in this study indicate that single-sex schools and classrooms, particularly in public contexts where they are applied voluntarily and with clear pedagogical criteria, have demonstrated significant improvements in academic achievement, school discipline, attendance, and student engagement. In many cases, this model has contributed to increasing girls' confidence in science and mathematics, as well as enhancing boys' literacy and language skills. These results suggest that a single-sex environment may provide more favorable conditions for addressing individual and gender-based differences in learning.

One of the main conclusions of this article relates to the role of differentiated instruction. Single-sex education provides teachers with the opportunity to tailor teaching methods, pace, and strategies according to the dominant learning styles of girls and boys, making the learning process more effective and targeted. The included neuroscientific and psycho-pedagogical studies reinforce the idea that differences in brain development, information processing, and emotional responses to the school environment can directly impact academic performance. In this sense, single-sex

education does not aim to reinforce gender divisions, but rather to create more suitable conditions for the development of each student's individual potential.

However, the study also highlights that the positive outcomes of single-sex education are neither automatic nor guaranteed. The effectiveness of this model depends on a range of factors, including the quality of teaching, the professional preparation of teachers, school infrastructure, institutional support, and parental involvement. In the absence of these elements, gender-based separation risks becoming a formal practice without a real impact on improving the quality of education. Furthermore, concerns raised by critics regarding the reinforcement of gender stereotypes and challenges in socialization remain issues that require continuous attention and careful pedagogical management.

An important conclusion of this study is that single-sex education should not be viewed as a counterpoint to coeducation, but rather as a complementary alternative within a flexible and inclusive educational system. The choice of this model should remain voluntary, grounded in rigorous scientific analysis, and responsive to the specific needs of school communities. Experiences from different countries indicate that educational policies allowing diversity in organizational models, while respecting principles of equality and non-discrimination, are more likely to produce sustainable outcomes.

In conclusion, this article argues that the resurgence of single-sex education in some Western educational systems does not represent a step backward toward traditional practices, but rather an effort to find alternative solutions to contemporary educational challenges. The debate on this issue remains open and calls for further long-term, comparative, and cross-cultural studies to more fully assess the impact of single-sex education on academic achievement, social development, and gender equality. Only through a balanced and evidence-based approach can the true place of this model in 21st-century education be determined.

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