Dangerous And Downstream Consequences Of Single Sex-Schooling Environment

Gender socialization is the “process through which children learn about social expectancies, attitudes, and behaviours associated with one’s gender” (CEECD, 2013, p.1). The school environment plays a profound role in the gender socialization of children. Individuals who advocate single sex education view that children should be taught separately founded on the belief that it increases academic performance. However, this belief comes from the misguided view that segregating children by gender helps to combat sexism and facilitates learning based on pseudoscientific evidence that male and female brains differ in structure and function (Halpern et al., 2011). The view that it combats sexism is similar to the battle against racism by forming all African American or all Latino environments however all this achieved was racial prejudice and inequality (Orfield et al., 2008). Further, what the actual valid scientific evidence shows is that single-sex education intensifies gender stereotyping and the degree to which individuals internalize stereotypes, which leads to several downstream consequences for individuals. Therefore, this essay will demonstrate how single-sex education increases the tendency for individuals to endorse and internalize gender stereotypes and the effects on academic performance. It will do this by discussing research, which focuses primarily on co-educational settings and applying it to single-sex environments. The broader implications of these effects of, for example, gender stereotyping, will also be considered. This essay will predominately refer to the two genders, male and female as research in this domain focuses on males and females.

Children show a preference for play with same-gender peers at an age as young as thirty months (Maccoby & Jacklin, 1987). The time spent engaging in this type of play is linked to increasing the likelihood that an individual will engage in gender-typed behaviour. In other words, it increases the likelihood of children engaging and endorsing gender-stereotypical behaviour. Martin and Fabes (2001) found that over time four to six-month-old children were more likely to play with same gender peers, which lead to an increase in gender-typed behaviour. For example, over time, boys showed an increase in levels of aggression compared to girls. Aggression is a trait commonly associated with idealized forms of masculinity, which previously have been linked to sexual aggression and a higher likelihood of rape myth acceptance (Loke & Mahalik, 2005). This does not suggest that boys who engaged in aggressive behaviour are going to become perpetrators of sexual aggression. However, the point is highlighting that engaging in gender-typed behaviour constantly reinforces gender stereotypes such as males should be aggressive, and such views are linked to negative implications later in life. The single-sex school environment completely removes the opportunity for individuals to engage in opposite gender play and, as a result creates an environment, which promotes engagement in stereotypical gendered behaviours. Nonetheless, this research is only correlational, and therefore it is unclear whether the increase in same gender peer play is what is causing the increase in gender-typed behaviour or whether it is other factors such as the role of parents encouraging sex-typed activities (Lytton & Rommey, 1991). Despite this, the more likely a child plays with same gender peers the more likely they are to engage in gender-typed behaviour and exaggerate differences between genders, which is unavoidable in single-sex environments (Halpern et al., 2011).

Differences are also exaggerated in environments, which make gender group categories significant as children are more inclined to employ labeling procedures to these groups, which as a result increases discrimination and stereotyping (Hillard & Liben, 2010). This is what is termed developmental intergroup theory (Hillard & Liben, 2010), and it increases the likelihood of in-group and out-group bias (Abrams, 2003). Research demonstrates that when environments label individuals along characteristics, for example; coloured t-shirts children infer ‘meaningful’ differences about these groups. Therefore, by segregating children through single-sex environments, it signals to children that gender is a meaningful category to differentiate. Hillard and Liben (2010) examined the effects of gender salience in a mixed pre-school environment. They compared the effects of low and high gender salience groups. In the low gender salience groups, the school environment continued as usual, and no reference to gender was made. However, in the high gender salience condition, references were commonly made about gender, such as lining up in genders. As predicted by developmental intergroup theory, after two weeks, children in the high gender salience condition expressed significantly more stereotypes and prejudiced at post-test to pre-test, compared to the low gender salience condition, which showed no comparable difference. Further, the children in the high gender salience condition avoided out-group play. This demonstrates how it is not just the passage of time that induces such differences between discriminatory behaviour but also highlights how segregating children reduces the opportunity for them to work together. This in fact is one of the main arguments against single-sex education (Halpern et al., 2011). Single-sex environments could not make gender more salient as it is categorizing individuals based on whether they are male or female, and this evidence demonstrates how doing so in just two weeks has the potential to induce damaging effects by increasing stereotyping and discrimination against the other gender.

Gender stereotypes pervade our society and are extremely harmful to individuals. For example, stereotypes surrounding women’s leadership ability demonstrates how women who show agentic traits such as assertiveness and dominance are less liked than men who show identical traits and are less likely to be hired for a ‘feminized’ role (Rudman et al., 2012). Likewise, men also suffer negative consequences of masculine stereotypes; for example, the Samaritans report revealed that one of the main reasons why more men commit more suicide than women is due to the unrealistic expectations surrounding the stereotypical thoughts of masculinity (Wyllie et al., 2012). Additionally, such categorization of ‘male’ and ‘female’ schools reinforces the harmful view of gender as binary, which has several consequences, for example denying the existence of non-binary individuals, increases prejudice towards these individuals for not conforming to social ideals.

Proponents of single-sex education typically infer that it is a means of increasing academic interest and performance. However, there is no evidence to suggest that this is true; in fact, in some cases, it is believed that co-education environments improve academic performance over single-sex schools (Pahlke et al., 2014). Moreover, evidence infers if anything that the single sex-schooling environment reduces academic performance. This is suggested due to evidence indicating that when gender is made salient, it can reduce academic performance. A broader term for such an idea is the stereotype threat, which is the “risk of confirming as self-characteristics a negative stereotype about one’s group,” (Steele and Aronson, 1995, p.797). A generally held stereotype is that women are bad at math and evidence indicates that when females are asked to state their gender i.e. making gender salient, it reduces their math’s performance compared to when nothing is inferred about gender (Pittinsky & Amabady, 1999). Research further demonstrates how in the school classroom, there appears to be a consistent

bias towards labeling females as bad at maths compared to males even when controlling for factors like grade point average (Riegle-Crumb & Humprhies, 2012). Further, it appears that there is an intersection between gender and race in the classroom environment where white females are often told that maths is to difficult for them whereas for ethnic minorities they also have to face the negative stereotypes about their general intellectual ability (Riegle-Crumb & Humprhies, 2012). Such ideas about stereotype threat and female academic performance are linked to the underrepresentation of women in STEM fields. This has been linked to the perception that females do not belong in these environments and so will not succeed subsequently limiting interest in these areas (Cheryan et al., 2009).

The internalisation of harmful stereotypes linked to segregating individuals subsequently reduces academic performance. McKenny and Bigler (2014,2016) found that by increasing the view that women should be sexualized resulted in a decrease in academic performance in adolescent females compared to peers who did not internalize such views. Further, in a second study individuals who internalized such views spent less time preparing for a mock newscast interview and more time preparing their appearance. However, the study used a small sample size and therefore lacked adequate power (McKenny & Bigler, 2014;2016). Nonetheless, this demonstrates how making gender salient through increasing women's likelihood of internalizing sexual notions has important implications for academic performance.

In summary, this essay has demonstrated the dangerous and downstream consequences that the single sex-schooling environment is likely to have on the process of gender socialization. It has achieved this by discussing research in mainly co-educational settings where gender has been made salient or segregated individuals based on gender. The research discussed points to the idea that single-sex environments increase the tendency of individuals to endorse and internalize gender stereotypes, which leads to a reduction in academic performance. Thus, the single sex schooling environment is harmful to gender socialization and goes against everything it tries to achieve.