

Coeducation (19th-21st centuries)

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Abstract

Single-sex schools developed in Europe in the early modern period since boys and girls were expected to lead different lives and hence acquire different skills. In the late 19th century feminists and pedagogues increasingly questioned this separation, especially when they discovered the prevalence of coeducation in the United States. Coeducation gradually became the dominant mode of schooling in Europe in the 20th century for ideological, pedagogical and pragmatic reasons, although the rate at which it progressed varied a great deal depending on the age of students, the religious and political culture of the society, and the availability of schools.

Article

The Protestant and Catholic reform movement of the early modern era encouraged the creation of a great many primary schools that separated boys and girls for moral reasons. This was often accompanied by the idea that women should teach girls and men should boys, thus encouraging the development of teaching opportunities for women. In reality, however, schools frequently mingled boys and girls, particularly in rural areas where schools were few and far between. More advanced schools catering to the middle classes were almost exclusively single-sex until the late 19th century in Europe when the first movement toward coeducation began to develop.

Beginning in the 1860s, Europeans began to write about the advantages and disadvantages of educating boys and girls together through the lens of what they witnessed in the United States where coeducation was frequent. In 1867, the pioneering British woman doctor Sophia Jex-Blake, for example, toured and reported on this practice in colleges such as Oberlin in Ohio as well as high schools and normal schools. In France, Edouard Laboulaye and the educational administrator Célestin Hippeau both drew attention to the American acceptance of coeducation that they believed unimaginable within the French context. The Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia (1876) drew pedagogues from all over Europe and disseminated information about coeducation in the American context, which did not meet with unanimous approval. German pedagogues, for example, deplored the moral liberty this practice was seen to encourage among young women; like many they believed coeducation encouraged a form of brazen independence among American girls that threatened traditional gender roles.

The defence of coeducational schools in Europe began in the final quarter of the century. Feminists and at times female school directors generally used the example of schools in the United States to argue for expanded opportunities for girls, since the American example showed that young women were capable of studying alongside their brothers in both higher secondary and university-level institutions (women in higher education). The delegates to the first international congress for women's rights in Paris in 1878 passed a resolution in favour of coeducation at all levels of schooling, but when the French created the public system of *collèges* and *lycées* in 1880 coeducation was resolutely rejected. The proponent of the law Camille Sée noted "I know very well that France is a Catholic country that does not have the mores of Protestant countries, where they apply coeducation

of the sexes.” The Netherlands was one such country where Protestant middle-class families petitioned the government to admit their daughters to a Higher Burgher School (*Hogere Burgerschool*) as early as 1871. But even in “backward” Catholic Mediterranean countries a small number of girls began to attend boys’ secondary schools, simply because no opportunities existed for girls, which an Italian historian has characterized as one of the “advantages of backwardness.” By the early 20th century the generalization of primary schooling, the development of post-primary schooling and increasing opportunities for women to find employment in the service sector provided a context for European pedagogues (Maria Grey in England, Marguerite Bodin in France, Don Francisco Giner de los Ríos in Spain) to question the separation of boys and girls within schoolrooms or in schools. Feminists continued to defend coeducation in international congresses, but more broadly reforming educators argued for the advantages of grouping pupils together by age rather than sex. Not only was this organization judged more efficient, it was also seen by many as an educational tool to promote better relations between the sexes. With the rise of a psychological understanding of childhood and adolescence, the International League for New Education (New Education) included coeducation as one of its basic demands at the founding congress of Calais in 1921. In the inter-war period more and more countries viewed coeducation as a means of pacifying gender relations rather than a claim for girls to pursue the same studies as boys. In societies where boys and girls increasingly mingled in after school activities (as the school-leaving age increased), learning in mixed-sex classrooms was seen to encourage girls to be more assertive while taming the more brutish instincts of boys. In Soviet Russia, however, coeducation was clearly seen as an egalitarian measure; in the summer of 1918 the State decreed that all education institutions would be coeducational in an effort to eliminate gender hierarchies. In practice, differences remained, but the measure unquestionably encouraged rising female enrolments, particularly in secondary schooling. In the inter-war period Soviet schools increasingly put in place a coeducational curriculum and pedagogy in pursuit of gender egalitarianism. And yet, in the context of war, a decision was made in 1943 to institute single-sex public education within cities in order to prepare boys to be soldiers and girls to be mothers. Coeducation was restored in 1954, following pressure from both parents and teachers, but this example, like contemporary debates in Europe and the United States about the reintroduction of single-sex schooling, highlights the extent to which gender ideologies underlie the organization of school life.

The move toward coeducation in Europe generally began in primary schools among pre-pubescent children. In France, for example, a law in 1933 authorized the “geminization” of rural primary schools, allowing female schoolteachers to take over the schooling of all children aged six to nine, while the male teacher taught the older students; age rather than sex determined the contours of the classroom. For adolescents the generalization of mixed-sex schools occurred much later, most notably in Catholic countries given the papal condemnation of coeducation in 1929 (encyclical *Divini Illius Magistri*). By the post-war period, however, the emergence of a vibrant youth culture in Western and Northern Europe and the enormous growth of secondary schooling challenged the ideological tenets of single-sex schooling; in a world where schooling was expected to offer equal opportunities to boys and girls, poor and rich alike, single-sex institutions were seen as re-enforcing gender differences and inequalities. In England, for example, the growth of social democratic ideology in the 1960s increasingly portrayed single-sex education in grammar schools as elitist. And in Catholic countries coeducation gradually lost its subversive and amoral reputation. Indeed, in 1957 an *Instruction on coeducation* offered Catholic pedagogues a series of practical rules and precautions to take as coeducation spread within Catholic schools as well. In response to a questionnaire in 1964 Catholic school directors in Italy and France indicated they no longer considered coeducation as an anathema; in Ireland, however, the survey revealed familial opposition still remained strong. By the end of the 20th century, in a world where women increasingly entered the job market with aspirations similar to those of their brothers, single-sex institutions that catered to an essentialist vision of gender differences only attracted a minority of families in Europe, although in certain instances such

institutions continue to attract parents because of the prestige attached to this form of schooling (such as within British public schools or the French Legion of Honour schools).

Although studies have revealed that coeducation does not necessarily promote equality, most feminist scholars agree it is an important first step. Unlike efforts to promote social equality through schooling, however, pedagogues and administrators have assumed coeducation would “naturally” eliminate gender inequalities without realizing the ways gender stereotypes continue to impact pedagogical practices as well as pupils’ behaviour.

Bibliography:

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