



At a boys' day school, young men don't see themselves as second best to girls

Boys-only boarding schools may be under scrutiny, but single sex day education should carry on, says headteacher Michael Sullivan

By Sarah Rodrigues

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We've been an all-boys school since 1956, and it has worked very well, both for the school and its students. There's long been an assumption that boys perform better, academically, in a co-educational environment but, actually, there's no conclusive data to support this. At [Forest Hill School](#), we believe it's down to the environment and teaching provided, rather than the gender/s of students.

One of the advantages of being educated at an all-boys school like this is that we can focus on how boys learn. Research demonstrates that [boys learn differently from girls](#), building different strengths at different paces and times. We ensure that everything at the school is geared towards this awareness; that the staff are trained, the lessons planned, and the learning environment designed accordingly.

For instance, girls tend to develop writing and reading skills earlier than boys, so in a co-educational environment, the expectation might be that boys have to keep up with the girls even though it's developmentally inappropriate. Here, we're able to really focus on those key skills and, for example, actively encourage our boys to enjoy reading. In Years 7&8, each student has one lesson per week where they simply read in the library with the librarians and their English teacher.

That library lesson really does promote and develop literacy very quickly – and, as mentioned, it's helpful to allow the boys to develop in an environment where they're not being compared – sometimes unfavourably - with girls. By focusing on how boys have been shown to learn more effectively – with healthy competition, with boundary setting, with clear expectations – we are able to develop their love of learning in a way in which they're not seeing themselves as second best to girls.

Negative stereotypes

Another aspect of our approach is gender stereotyping. It's important to point out that this is different from research-supported insights into how male and female brains are wired differently: this is more concerned with how boys and girls perceive themselves in the light of social expectation. Here at Forest Hill School, we do a lot of work around countering negative stereotypes that people have about young men, and that young men have about themselves.

One of the reasons why we've been so successful in our education of boys probably goes back to 2004, during the last Labour administration, when each secondary school had to take on a specialism. It would have been very easy for us, with our strong sporting culture and a good record in competitions, to earmark ourselves as a sporting school. However, the head and senior leadership at the time decided to become a specialist school in the performing arts - and I think from this has flowed our emphasis on the fact that we want to make sure we are providing a really-well rounded education and helping to nurture well-rounded, engaged citizens.

In line with this history, we've long ensured that we have a really broad curriculum, even in an era when schools were narrowing their curriculums quite regularly. We never did that; we always made it as diverse as possible, with a huge emphasis on visual as well as performing arts

Often, they are not areas in which boys, stereotypically or intuitively, get involved, or believe they will enjoy. Here, in an environment where it's all boys, they're often more willing to let themselves go; so boys are able to have a holistic experience, which may not be the case with girls around – with dance, for example. When the opposite gender isn't present, many stereotypes – and the desire to live up to them – are removed.

Restorative justice

We're a restorative school, which means that when there is an issue – between the boys themselves, or between a student and a teacher- a meeting is held between parties to discuss what went wrong, what the parties were thinking and how they can move forward from that point.

This takes place in addition to any sanctions which are issued – and I think this system, plus the confidence that's built through the emphasis on literacy and artistic expression, can have a huge impact on how the boys learn to develop relationships, teamwork and communication skills – both at school and beyond.

Many schools have gone down the path of having a two-year Key Stage 3; we've resisted this so that our boys can experience the full range of subjects right through to the end of year 9 – not only the core subjects of English, maths and science and humanities, but also foreign languages, art, drama, dance, music. And this gives them a much firmer basis from which to move on and choose options subjects for GCSE, and to choose a course of study that's appropriate for them.

The LGBTQ+ community is actively supported at this school and we work very hard to counter the stereotypical male views of these identities. We hold a Stonewall Bronze – soon to be Silver award - and have equality groups and ambassadors.

Having a tolerant society is critical, but so is ensuring that we have advocates who instil a sense, not just of tolerance, but also of pride. And in our continuing professional development programme around our Stonewall certification, we are in the process of

amending various of our policies, including around uniform. At some schools, sanctions are given for colouring hair; we don't subscribe to such rules. We are absolutely committed to ensuring that there is inclusivity and equality for everyone.

Up until last year, the four houses in our house system were named Drake, Harvey, Reynolds and Shackleton – figures who didn't really reflect the diversity of our school and community. So we brought together the school's pupils, staff and parents to select new names for the houses: Parks (Black Rights activist Rosa Parks) Tull ([Walter Tull](#), professional footballer and the first Black officer in the British Army) and Turing (Alan Turing, WWII codebreaker, persecuted for being homosexual) The final house is named Ofosu-Asare, after [Kwame Ofosu-Asare](#), a student of this school who was tragically murdered in another neighbourhood, the victim of mistaken identity.

As a South East London boys' secondary, we have many people walk in expecting to see a particular type of school; a particular type of behaviour and relationships between boys and staff. And the number of people who say, 'I didn't expect to see this,' and 'this is such a nice, caring community' – that's one of the truest endorsements of what we do.

Toxic masculinity

Why do there appear to be issues around toxic masculinity in schools with more resources than ours? I think it's a question of creating the right sort of environment and about upholding certain principles for the boys who come here. It's not just about creating young men for certain types of socio-economic success; it's about helping them to become engaged citizens of the future and not feeling they need to conform to stereotypes that society holds for them.

So the fact that we've got a really broad curriculum; the fact that we're a restorative school, where relationships are key; the fact that we have a diverse staff and that we work to make sure that a range of people are represented at different levels, from peer leaders, to house captains, to teachers. It's not something that just happens by magic, you have to work to create the environment where all of these things can flourish.

If I were to be told that we were going to be made into a co-educational school? I'd have to be given very good reasons why that should be the case. We are really successful in what we do in a boys-only environment. We've had five offers for Oxford and Cambridge this year and we continue to have increasing numbers, every year, going to Russell Group universities. But it's more than that: it's not just about academically high standards; it's about the education of the whole child. And this is something that I believe we do very well.

Michael Sullivan is Head Teacher of Forest Hill School in London