

Gender Wars

BY MINDY SCHILLER

SPECIAL TO THE WORLD JEWISH DIGEST

Sugar and spice and all things nice, that's what little girls are made of. Stick and snails and puppy dog's tails, that's what little boys are made of."

It's no secret that boys and girls are not like each other. In fact, for much of this country's history, they were treated as such. Now, however, they're being schooled as such.

Over the past several years, the United States has seen a major trend toward single-sex education in the public school sector—a result of emerging scientific data, changing policies in the Bush administration and a willingness to find creative solutions to some of the chronic issues plaguing U.S. public schools. In 2002, for instance, there were four single-sex public schools in the country. Now, according to the National Association for Single Sex Public Education, there are 97. Moreover, there are almost 400 co-education public schools offering a smattering of single-sex classes, with

over 100 more set to initiate in 2009. In short: single sex education is back in vogue.

A new study, however, conducted on students in the Israeli public-school system, casts serious doubt on the benefits of single-sex education. It suggests that the more girls there are in the classroom, the better both sexes will perform in nearly every academic area. The study, a soon-to-be-released working paper written by economists Analia Schlosser and Victor Lavy, from Tel Aviv University and Hebrew University respectively, analyzed test scores, matriculation data and personal, government-distributed surveys from over 650,000 students over a period of 12 years. It concludes that classrooms with a majority of girls do better overall than classrooms with equal proportions



A new Israeli study contends that boys perform better in the classroom when they are outnumbered by girls. Above, Ulpna High School in Jerusalem.

of boys and girls. Moreover, it is one of the few studies to address the question of gender in schools from a scientific, empirical standpoint.

"Most of the studies look at whether girls do better when they are only surrounded by girls," says Schlosser from Tel Aviv University, where she is now an assistant professor. "But I was surprised that there are not so many studies that look at what are the consequences for boys ... Nobody looked at the question of what would happen in a mixed-gender environment. Or what happens in a mixed-gender environment that's imbalanced?"

What happens, it seems, is that there are lower amounts of classroom disruption, better relationships between students and teachers, less frustrated teachers and higher tests scores. Ironically, it's not necessarily because the boys are doing anything differently: for example, according to Schlosser, the amount of time boys spent on homework per night remained completely unchanged regardless of the gender ratios in the classroom. The time they spent in the classroom, however, was more productive, simply because there were fewer distractions—which meant more opportunities to learn.

This certainly has implications for the Israeli school system. In fact, Schlosser thinks the Israeli government should use the knowledge gained from the study—namely, that classrooms fare better when their population is weighted more heavily female—when creating policies or allocating resources. "The policy implication is not to keep girls apart from boys," she says.

Schlosser doesn't go so far as to make the same recommendation for the U.S., but she does say the implications of the study can, and should, be applied to U.S. schools. After all, she says, human biology is human biology, regardless of the country. "It's an almost universal fact. Girls behave better than boys ... Our results are very simple."

Of course, not everyone agrees with Schlosser.

"In Israel," says Michael Gurian, bestselling author

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of "Boys and Girls Learn Differently!" and co-founder of the Gurian Institute, which trains parents and educators on teaching to gender, "you do not have the problems we have. We are simply facing issues in our inner-city schools that they are not facing."

In fact, says Gurian, while the study may be of great value, its failure to isolate the myriad of potentially significant variables—such as race or socio-economic status—makes it "of limited value for the reality of what's going on in the American classroom."

Until recently, single-sex education in America has only been a staple of private and parochial schools. For instance, according to Rabbi Martin Schloss, director of Yeshiva/Day School Services at the Board of Jewish Education of Greater New York, a majority of New York City's 315 Jewish day schools, serving roughly 100,000 students in the New York City region, are single-sex schools—and that number is rapidly growing. While he admits that this is mostly an Orthodox phenomenon, he also points out that even more centrist-Orthodox schools offer some portion of their day—usually their Judaic subjects—in a single-sex environment. "It's a religious imperative," Schloss says. "It reduces a lot of potential issues and, quite frankly, the population that we are talking about believes in a separation of the genders—just like in the synagogue and other places—so the school is merely an extension of the community." Moreover, says Schloss, he does not believe the study will have any effect on the schools in question "because [the separation of the genders] is not predicated on academics."

In the 1990's, however, single-sex classrooms began to seep into the public arena as well, after the American Association of University Women published "Short-changing Girls, Shortchanging America," a study that pointed to girls' plummeting self-esteem and to their lack of motivation for the fields of math and science. A number of related studies were conducted—in 1998, 2005 and 2007, just to name a few—on the effects of single-sex education, most of them concluding that, at least for females, single-sex education is better.

This, combined with emerging information in 2007 about differences in the development in male and female brains and a desperation to solve some of the chronic problems of the American public-schools system, has led to a surge in single-sex classrooms. In 2002, the National Association for Single Sex Public Education was founded, dedicated to advancing the case for single-sex education and providing support for those who desire it, and in October 2006, the government issued the final regulations for Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, allowing for greater flexibility in offering single-sex classes and permitting school districts to provide single-sex schools.

According to Gurian, these changes in attitude toward single-sex education have been particularly positive for urban and lower-socio-economic schools. In fact, he says that co-education has been remarkably unsuccessful in these types of environments, a fact he attributes to

what's happening in the home. In other words, due to high rates of absentee fathers, the boys in urban schools or schools predominantly attended by boys of color are getting too much female attention in their lives and too little male attention. "They don't get much male influence to help them discipline their behavior," Gurian says. "They act out even more [when more girls] are present."

"When you take the girls out of the mix," he continues, "you get immediate, immediate gains in all of their performance markers and in discipline ... assuming [the presence of] well-trained staff who know how to handle boys. Because what the boys now do is they gain 'male' attention and develop the skills to discipline their own hormonal behavior. Puberty. They gain the ability to handle themselves. And in fact when there are more girls, they act out much more."

The results contradict the Schlosser-Lavy study, which suggests that though single-sex education may be good for girls, it is detrimental for boys, who benefit significantly from the effects of a female-populated classroom. All of which raises the question: if girls are really better off all on their lonesome, then why would Schlosser and Lavy suggest that they should be placed in mixed classrooms? In the words of Rabbi Schloss: "How moral is it to put girls together with boys when you know it will hurt the girls?"

According to Schlosser, it's not that simple. "I don't think that separating the genders is a positive thing," she

says, and then goes on to discuss certain intangible benefits of coeducation—such as learning how to socialize with the opposite sex. "We learn other skills that are not measured by test scores. We need to learn how to study together." Schlosser also worries that if single-sex education were implemented nationally, the government might begin allocating different resources to each gender—the precise issue that predicated the equal-education amendment back in 1972. "And you never know where the limit of that is."

Ultimately, there is no consensus on whether the study can be applied to the U.S. school system. Indeed, it remains to be seen whether the Israeli government will use it to inform their policy decisions. What educators do agree on, however, is the fact that the question of gender's effect on the classroom is one well worth asking—again and again, with more and more precision if need be. This study opens the conversation back up and paves the way for other research—perhaps more targeted to the specific problems of each region's public schools. It could be one step closer to educational reform that actually lasts. **WJD**

Mindy Schiller is the assistant editor for World Jewish Digest.

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