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OPINION & ANALYSIS

JONATHAN JANSEN | No, man, boys' and girls' schools have run their course
Their continued existence is irrational as there is no good social, cultural or academic reason for their retention

VICTORIAN IDEA OF BOYS ONLY SCHOOLS MEANINGLESS TODAY

A few weeks ago, a polite, older gentleman sat me down for coffee and asked with an earnestness in his voice: is there still a place for boys' schools? He was the head of a boys' schools association, and I did not want to deflate his obvious enthusiasm for the concept. But I had to be honest: no, sir, the idea of boys-only schools is anachronistic, out of touch with the times.

I can understand 100 years ago when old Victorian ideas still cast an influence over the organisation and culture of South African schools, that single-sex schools made sense, but it is meaningless today. The fixation on traditional gender roles, the belief that boys and girls were different in everything from learning styles to social mores, and that occupational roles were predestined to proceed along gendered paths, is of course nonsense this side of the century. Girls now become engineers and pilots and boys become nurses and occupational therapists.

It is time to convert all boys' and girls' schools into "co-ed" institutions as a matter of national policy. Their continued existence is irrational in the sense that there is no good social, cultural or academic reason for their continuance. In fact, it makes South Africa's educational system look awfully out-of-date in a world where technological revolutions alone have transformed gender roles in ways that open up opportunities for all. The parental position that "it was good enough for me" is not an argument, simply a misplaced nostalgia.

To be sure, while much has changed in society, we still have a long way to go. All four university vice-chancellors in the Cape are men, an embarrassing development.

There are other compelling reasons for ending all boys' schools. In South Africa, these institutions have become the breeding ground for a toxic masculinity that every now and again breaks out into the public sphere. Rituals of violence and humiliation sometimes lead to serious injury and leave scars for life especially when there are also hostels involved. Rugby games become adrenaline-filled duels between youth with far too much muscle built up in gyms (and who knows what else) and among whom a hyper-competitive contestation leaves more than physical bruising on the body. It serves no purpose in this column to list all the well-known violence in boys' schools that hit the media in the past few years.

Old-fashioned ideas that in co-ed classrooms, boys take over in science classes, for example, and do the practical experiments while girls watch admiringly, is a fantasy easily dismissed. It depends entirely how a teacher manages that laboratory period and how opportunities for leadership and learning are distributed. In fact, it is the perfect situation in which you teach timid pupils across race,

class or gender to take responsibility and to step forward so that everyone gets a chance to shine. I just did that in my high school teaching sessions (natural and life sciences) in recent weeks.

To be sure, while much has changed in society, we still have a long way to go. All four university vice-chancellors in the Cape are men, an embarrassing development. There are still churches throughout the country in which women are not allowed to speak or serve as lead pastors or priests, and the recent parade of an all-male caste of Catholic cardinals choosing a pope is sadly out of touch with the real world. But in many other ways, society has changed and impressed on all our institutions from the judiciary to the world of aviation the importance of women in leadership in sectors long reserved for men and, most of our history, white men. I was thrilled the other day to see a woman refereeing a major rugby match and the fantastic achievements of our national women's cricket team.

So give me one good reason for a boys' or girls' school? If the fear of intimacy between high school kids is your concern, trust me, you need more than separate buildings to contain those hormones. On the contrary, "co-ed" schools could very well be the place in which young men learn how to live alongside and respect young women (or whomever they love).

All that said, I want to conclude with a short tribute to one of the greatest school leaders I had the privilege of knowing, and that is the principal of Pretoria Boys High who sadly left us this week. Bill Schroder was the kind of school leader I respected deeply for his courage, humility and generosity. Yes, he led an elite school but also used his formidable skills to improve education in Soshanguve with a single-mindedness that lifted the spirits of so many of us.

Rest well, gentle giant of South African education.