

The Pros And Cons Of Co-Education

A formal education system reflects the values of society because its purpose is to implement those things that the general community considers important and valuable. If the community changes in regard to what is and is not appropriate, the system will also change. This is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in Bangladesh where our elitist society has moved up in its beliefs. Whether or not this is in the best interest of the student - or in the best interest of the nation - is a matter for debate.

English medium schools have mushroomed over the years to produce students who are misfits in society. But guardians are not concerned about this aspect of schooling and are instead busy comparing the exam scores of their child. It becomes a matter of prestige. Sometimes it would seem education for education sake is their least priority. Even the entrepreneurs of English medium schools admit that today running a school is like a business venture and like all businesses, the competition is cutthroat. But English medium schools are today a large part of our education system.

A century ago, or even less, no one would have had much doubt about which system was better, particularly at the high school level. Moral values were clearly defined, and to most people, it seemed to be appropriate to separate boys and girls for their formal schooling. Traditional Christian communities continue to cling to the old values in their approach to education. For them, segregation by gender is the norm. But most English medium schools in Bangladesh have become coeducational but whether or not this has been seen as beneficial to young children during their early years or just a means for filling up the quota of seats is not certain. Until relatively recently, some authorities, such as those responsible for missionary schools have tended to view gender segregation as being the norm at the high school level and coeducation as being a daring innovation. However almost everyone today believes that coeducation is by far the best choice for students in their teens, because it recognizes that the two genders live, work, and play together in the real world. Only by being together can young adolescents learn to appreciate and respect others of the opposite sex, and by studying and socialising together on a daily basis, they learn how men and women develop appropriate roles in society both as parents and as useful and productive citizens.

Not everyone shares this view. Although many parents may recognise that there are advantages to coeducation, they believe they can provide most of these benefits at the family level through community-based activities. In other words they prefer that their teen-aged children attend gender-segregated schools as it is the disadvantages of a formal coeducation system that concern them. Teen-age pregnancy is a reality, and many parents believe that if their sons and daughters make strong friendships at school with members of their own sex, they will be in a better position to avoid this problem outside of school hours. They also believe that students will be more likely to concentrate on their academic duties when they are not faced with the distraction of male-female relationships that inevitably preoccupy the minds of adolescents.

Although the importance of education in human resource development must be emphasised we should be more aware than we are that sex is occurring on school properties. In fact it is more frequent than adults might imagine. As many single sex schools have been turned into coeducational schools where girls and boys study together it is now believed to lead to increased sexual activity in schools. This has resulted in an increasing number of teen pregnancies. Although it is the responsibility of parents to take care of their school going children and instill in them ethics and a sense of morality most of the parents of the students studying at these schools are too pre-occupied with their own lives to pay attention to this important factor. Many think it is the duty of the school to instill this element in the teens attending their schools. But we are also suffering from a relatively new aspect as children from nouveau riche families who think they can buy education, rub shoulders with the children from the upper middle class who still value education for education sake.

But preparation for a moderately decent life depends on the smooth functioning of secondary education especially in a modern society where daily life is ever increasingly affected by the highly dynamic excellence in science and technology. Even though our education is organised in line with universal practices, it suffers from a number of inherent irrational structural heterogeneities, especially at the secondary level. Pre-university education has been weakened due to the simultaneous existence of three parallel systems: general education, madrasah education and independent alien course-based English medium ones.