



St Leonard's College
An education for life.

From the Principal

Peter Clague



Like a Fish to Water

Write about coeducation, they said.

I couldn't help thinking of that hackneyed joke about the swimmer on the shore, calling out to ask a fish "How's the water?" and the fish replying, "What is water?" Some things are so obvious, we are oblivious to their very existence.

Full disclosure: I arrived at St Leonard's two weeks ago (at the time of writing) with exactly the same trepidation a pupil faces on their first day at school. Will I fit in? Will the teachers like me? What will happen when they discover I have never watched a game of AFL in my life?

But I also came with an equal dose of excitement and an ambition to delve into what makes this vibrant place tick. Since my appointment a year ago, COVID has conspired to keep me out of Australia, so my preparation was confined to trawling the internet, fishing for any digital snippet that might offer a clue. Now that I have finally landed, amidst people and facilities even more outstanding in real life than they appear in the virtual world, I am on a mission to understand what lies behind the magic.

A few things are immediately obvious. The children in the ELC are like clones of Yoda – small, wise, and allseeing. On my first visit there, one young man offered up a hand-drawn, five-page fold-out map of the College, in order that I wouldn't get lost. A sage year 3 girl then solemnly promised that everyone at St Leonard's would be kind to me, even though I came from New Zealand.

The Junior School was no less impressive, buzzing with the industry of boys and girls tackling global challenges together. Sorting out everything from migration to microplastics with unfettered optimism. I am pretty sure they should be running the country. Their solutions were elegant, as was the way in which these pint-sized problem-solvers had organised themselves. Grouped not by gender, but by mutual interest. At nine years old, they had already worked out secrets of effective teamwork that would put many adult workplaces to shame.



And so it continued, up through the College. Outside the Years 5/6 building, boys and girls competing, both against and alongside one another, in a sporting carnival. Then on to Middle School classes, where gender roles seemed equally irrelevant, as teachers quietly got on with the business of ignoring stereotypes. Boys donning aprons and wielding saucepans, girls rewiring remote-control cars. No big deal.

All the way up to the highest levels of Senior School study. Young men and women, completely at ease in each other's company. Accepting of, rather than obsessing over, their individual differences. No X/Y divide in the Merton building; the only chromosomes that mattered were the ones being studied under a microscope in a Science lab (ok, I know you can't actually see them that way – just let me milk the metaphor). In short, as I toured St Leonard's for the first time, coeducation seemed so fundamental to the College's ebb and flow, it was invisible.

Which is not to say that I have anything against single-sex schools. I was once Deputy Head of a Boys' School which had much to recommend it. But little that could not have been replicated if girls had been present (indeed, that school went on to coeducate not long after I left). Neither is it my style to be disparaging of the competition. I am content to set out our stall and let parents make the right choice for their child. It is simply that, after more than 30 years of working with children of all ages, I happen to believe that a co-ed environment is the healthiest and happiest model for most.

Ultimately, I want young people to be like that fish, not even consciously comprehending the water in which they swim. I want them to find respectful, easy relationships with all other children so normal that they don't even consider there might be any other alternative.

To believe innately that all people possess equal possibility and potential. If the pandemic taught us anything, surely it was that? The COVID virus did not discriminate; no gender, race, religion, or political persuasion was spared. Equally, it was the cooperation of diverse people the world over that ensured human resilience triumphed in the end. You would hope that not only their intelligence, but also their ability to collaborate, was a function of their early education.

From the Sahara to the Sorbonne, the primary ambition of all schools is to prepare young people for the world beyond their gates. And unless you are planning to join a nunnery, there are very few single-sex occupations left in the world. Hence, ensuring a school's demography mirrors the world in which our children will walk seems obvious.

Our young people will leave us to enter universities, join the workforce, and ultimately contribute to societies that will – rightly – expect them to know how to interact easily and appropriately with others, including those of a different gender. From the feminist revolution of the Seventies to the #MeToo movement of recent times, the impetus for gender equality and mutual respect is at last reaching all corners of society. I'm not saying we are there yet, but in terms of role models for empowering women, we have come a long way to get from Greta Garbo to Greta Thunberg in a fairly short time. Schools have been an engine of that momentum, hence my belief in coeducation.



I could trot out the data. The relative academic merits of coeducation vs single-sex teaching is one of the most heavily researched topics in Western education. For anyone who takes pleasure in wading through pages of densely packed edu-jargon and endless footnotes, I am happy to share. For the rest of you, suffice to say that the outcomes of most studies are inconclusive. The problem is often that initial bias in the sample can skew the results.

For instance, some studies suggesting girls do better in single-sex schools don't account for the fact that a disproportionate number of those pupils may be predetermined to succeed academically, wherever they are taught. Often, parents who send their daughters to girls' schools do so because they already place a higher premium on academic attainment than other families. Hence, the population of the school may be predestined to perform well. That does not mean, however, that those girls would not have performed equally well in any other educational setting.

Another consideration of an exclusively single sex environment is that it can inadvertently end up perpetuating the very gender stereotypes it intends to counter. Non-traditional subject options can be harder to sustain outside of a coeducational setting. Think of Food Science for boys, or Computer Coding for girls. Yet in all the subjects they offer, coeducational schools like St Leonard's can (and do) regularly test for gender bias in academic outcomes, allowing teachers to immediately address any imbalance.

Ultimately though, it is not academic achievements that underpin my belief in coeducation. It may seem like sacrilege, coming from a professional educator, but I believe that the sum of a child's schooling is far greater than their final ATAR. Learning how to be comfortable in your own skin, and how to respect others doing the same, seems of equal importance to me. And that requires exposure from an early age to people whose perspectives and personalities differ from your own. That may be challenging at times, but so are most of the important lessons we learn in life.

For example, one argument often touted for sending girls to single sex schools is the opportunity to let them flourish without distraction, away from the perceived dominating influence of boys in a classroom. However, those same boys will still be in attendance at the first university lecture. Surely it is better to teach girls how to "lean in" (and boys how to dial it down) before either party becomes too set in their ways? That said, I don't often meet many shrinking violets amongst the young women we teach today.

Even if different genders do occasionally jar as they learn to live alongside one another, there is plenty of research to show that sexism and stereotyping occurs just as frequently in single-sex environments (male or female) as in mixed settings. I would argue it is much easier to detect, debunk, and dispel those behaviours in a coeducational school. Just as racism tends to diminish in societies that become more multicultural, so too does it get harder for students to foster inappropriate attitudes about genders different to their own when living and working alongside each other.

Surely the same is true of all human differences? Diverse school communities that include a blend of sex and sexuality, race and religion, culture and creed, bodies and brains, aren't actually virtue-signalling bastions of the woke. They are just, well... normal. A reflection of the society they serve. Like water to a fish. And where better for any child to learn to swim, than St Leonard's?