



UK study finds single-sex girls mentally tougher than co-ed girls

Issue 11/2021: July 28, 2021

A recently released study from the United Kingdom has found that girls who attend single-sex schools are generally more confident and emotionally in control than girls attending state and independent co-educational schools. AQR International's 'mental toughness' research also indicates that the pandemic may have exacerbated gaps and differences that already exist between students, with girls who are mentally tougher having an advantage in dealing with the pandemic compared with girls who demonstrate less confidence and emotional control.

AQR International, which specialises in psychometric assessments, writes that mental toughness determines how a person deals with challenges, opportunities, stress and pressure. It is a mindset that an individual adopts in every situation, regardless of the circumstances. Mental toughness is closely related to growth mindset, character, resilience, grit, learned optimism and other similar characteristics. It is also strongly correlated with performance, wellbeing, positive behaviours, aspirations and employability. Like a growth mindset, mental toughness can be learned and developed over time.

There is also a relationship between depression, anxiety and lower levels of mental toughness. AQR International describes a 2020 study by Dr Dara Mojtahedi of Huddersfield University (UK) which explored the relationship between these factors during the pandemic, classifying each person's responses on a scale ranging from 'mentally tough' to 'mentally sensitive'. Mojtahedi found that although everyone was stressed due to the pandemic, the mentally tougher a person was, the better they were able to deal with stress. On the other hand, 'mentally sensitive' individuals became even more mentally sensitive when stressed, making them more susceptible to anxiety and depression.

In 2017 AQR International assessed soft skills in UK school students using the 4 Cs framework — Control, Commitment, Challenge, Confidence — to investigate character and resilience in young people. It was found that, on average, boys possess stronger levels of soft skills, including resilience and dealing with adversity, than girls.

In a follow-up analysis published in June 2021, AQR International delved deeper into its 2017 research, focusing on gender differences in mental toughness and how the pandemic might affect the wellbeing of students. In addition to further investigating differences between girls and boys, researchers analysed the mental toughness of girls attending Girls' Schools Association (UK) schools compared with girls from co-educational schools.

Overall, the updated analysis found that girls attending UK single-sex schools possess higher mental toughness scores than girls attending co-educational schools, particularly for emotional control and confidence. Students at girls' schools demonstrate greater commitment, greater life and emotional control, higher interpersonal confidence, and greater confidence in their own abilities.

Research on mental toughness has also found that it is significantly linked to higher academic attainment, increased motivation and enhanced educational outcomes — which might explain, writes AQR International, "why girls in girls' schools typically do better academically and are more likely to choose to study STEM subjects than girls in coeducational schools".

In addition, a separate AQR study found that Girls' School Association (GSA) headteachers (principals), who took the adult version of the mental toughness test taken by students, are highly resilient with a level of mental toughness "significantly higher than average". Three-quarters of GSA headteachers (111 in total) took the test, scoring particularly highly for life and emotional control, "which reflects a sense of self-worth commonly described as a 'can do' spirit".



Donna Stevens, Chief Executive of the Girls' Schools Association (UK), said that:

The level of resilience indicated in GSA Heads should inspire great confidence, in any parent, in their ability to lead their schools calmly and robustly through challenging times, as indeed we have seen during the pandemic.

While it is noteworthy that both students and principals of girls' schools score highly on mental toughness measures, it is equally, if not more, important to note that low mental toughness may be linked to depression and anxiety. However, like Carol Dweck's growth mindset research showing that intelligence is not fixed, AQR International writes that the "good news" is that mental toughness is a trait that can be developed and improved. Mentally sensitive individuals who are open to changing their mindset will "consciously seek to change", resulting in improved coping mechanisms to deal with stress and pressure.

However, AQR also states that "it isn't always necessary to develop mental toughness in an individual". For those who fall into the mentally sensitive range, it can be enough to show them the "core behaviours and actions that a mentally tough person adopts", giving them the skills to deal with stressful and challenging situations without seeking to change their underlying sensitivity. "Developing awareness amongst staff and self-awareness amongst pupils about the way they respond mentally to major events can 'close the gap' for many pupils."

Chief Executive of AQR International, Doug Strycharczyk, recently told school principals attending a Girls' Schools Association summer briefing that:

This has significant implications for much of the population, during and after the pandemic. It shows the importance of being aware of an individual's and an organisation's mental toughness. Differences in mental toughness may well have widened during the pandemic. Any government 'catch-up' scheme would do well to take this into account.

All things being equal, writes AQR International, international studies show that "having higher levels of mental toughness confers an advantage for those individuals". They are more effective at dealing with challenge, opportunity, stress and pressure, and less likely to be anxious or depressed. "Developing young people's mental toughness," concludes the 2021 report, "is an investment made towards creating a more resilient society of the future that is capable of managing new challenges with a positive outlook."

References

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