Are segregated sports classes scientifically justified?

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ABSTRACT

School sports classes are gender segregated in many countries, and this has implications for mental and physical development. Here we look for an evidence-based rationale for this practise.

INTRODUCTION

School sports classes are a key part of physical and mental development, yet in many countries these classes are gender segregated. Before institutionalised segregation can be condoned it is important to tackle assumptions and check for an evidence-based rationale. This presentation aims to analyse the key arguments for segregation given in comment-form response to a recent media article discussing mixed school sports (Lawson, 2013).

Table 1. Gender difference in sports access.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ability and Interest</th>
<th>Primary</th>
<th>Secondary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% of pupils registered for additional (girls)</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of pupils involved in inter-school competition activities (girls)</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of pupils involved in inter-school competition activities (boys)</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of pupils involved in sport volunteering and leadership (boys)</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>30%</td>
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</tbody>
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Figure 1. Variation in weight-normalised strength by different factors. Data adapted from Taeymans et al., 2009.

BEHAVIOURAL CONTROL

The second most common argument was that keeping children separate avoids behavioural issues including self-consciousness, sexual harassment or discrimination (13% comments). As segregation isn’t realistic as a life-long strategy, we must question the validity of losing this controlled opportunity to teach respect. Indeed, people raised in segregated environments as minors have been shown to experience greater social anxiety in the adult world (Storcha and Masia-Warner, 2004).

CONCLUSION

Segregation moves gender politics to identity politics. This work has found no scientific evidence to support the widely-held reasons to segregate gender at school, yet it is socially accepted. Children’s participation is greatly affected by gender (Table 1) even though gender is not the primary cause of physical variation (Figure 1).

REFERENCES


