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).

THE STRENGTH ARGUMENT
The primary argument given was division for strength, ability or protection (75% comments). It is a common, but false assumption, that young female bones are more breakable or girls more fragile when given the same level of exercise. Schools already have fairly homogeneous groupings due to age-based classes.

At school age variation within gender is larger than variation between genders, yet there is no tendency to segregate a sports class on the basis of height, strength, or relative age, only to segregate for gender.

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).

Children’s development is shaped by the environment and value systems they are placed in. If we are to condone belief in individual variation over stereotyping the curriculums should enforce this.

REFERENCES