

Education with Methods in Context

Worksheet 2.1: Gender & Education

Read the passage below and answer the questions that follow

Many teachers will confirm that groups of girls and boys usually tend to behave in quite different ways and research shows that boys can have a negative impact on girls' schooling experience and performance, as well as that of non-'laddish' boys.

In the classroom, boys tend to take up more space than girls do. They sprawl more, they move about the class more and they invade the available space. During my observations of largely working-class, ethnically-diverse secondary classrooms, I recorded that boys frequently kicked balls around, walked or ran about the classroom, pushed, slapped or hit each other, or threw things across the class. I was surprised and concerned for the boys themselves about the high level of physical violence which went on in the classroom, seriously or in play-fighting. Christine Skelton has pointed out that maintaining an 'aggressive and competitive masculine identity' involves constant confrontation and challenges between boys. Certainly it seemed to me that boys were continually either competing or being policed by other boys in a 'hardness' hierarchy. The effect of this physical dominance in the classroom is to subordinate and constrain the girls' interactions and those of less physically confident, assertive or aggressive boys. It disrupts the classroom and interferes with learning for boys and girls alike.

This sort of behaviour continues in the playground and playground activity is highly gender-segregated. Research reveals that girls and boys use playtime and the playground for very different activities and, even among the youngest children, research documents a multitude of pernicious issues ranging from boys' domination of the physical space, to teasing and sexual harassment.

Football is one of the most obvious ways that boys dominate the primary and secondary school playground space. Football games usually involve a large number of boys and may take most of the available playground space. When wet weather stops children from playing on the grass, football games can force those children who are not involved in the game on to the very edges of the playground. Girls sometimes say that they are afraid of going too near the game. Boys may use football to enforce a masculinity hierarchy by excluding girls and less athletic boys from games. As in the classroom, boys' dominance of the playground space, and the way they police girls and less 'macho' boys, can result in the sexual harassment of girls and of those boys not judged as sufficiently 'masculine'. Recent research suggests that being loud, disruptive and abusive is an expression of a high-status form of masculinity in school. The 'laddish' behaviour in secondary schools associated with high-status masculinity, and the disruptiveness of some primary boys, systematically excludes and ridicules girls and non-'laddish' boys. This laddish behaviour itself impedes the learning of those involved, but it also distracts the teacher and other pupils, wastes teacher time and disrupts the education of girls and of non-'laddish' boys.

For the majority of pupils of all ages, 'being popular' and 'fitting in' are extremely important, and those who fail to conform may face marginalization and/or bullying. Fundamentally, gendered classroom behaviour supports a 'hidden curriculum' that can make girls believe that they are of less value than boys, undermining girls' confidence and self-esteem. Similarly, through this hidden curriculum boys learn about and experience a hierarchy of competitive 'laddish' masculinities in which those who fail to conform to the stereotypes may be routinely demonized, marginalized and punished by their peer groups.

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Questions

1. Identify *three* ways that the behaviour of boys might disadvantage the education of girls.
2. In what ways does the behaviour of boys described in the passage waste teacher time and disrupt learning?
3. Explain what is meant by the term 'hidden curriculum' and identify what gendered behaviour the passage above suggests boys and girls learn through this hidden curriculum.
4. What pressures does the passage suggest are placed on boys who wish to get on with their learning at school?
5. With reference to the passage and your own experiences, suggest the characteristics that might be associated with 'high-status masculinity' in schools.
6. Suggest, with examples, what consequences may follow at school for boys and girls who fail to conform to gender stereotypes.
7. On the basis of what you have read in the passage and your own wider understanding, suggest reasons why girls might still be underachieving in education, even though they are outperforming boys.