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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).



Lawson, 2013.

	Base sizes	Primary		Secondary	
		Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys
Opportunity and Engagement					
% of pupils who participate in at least 3 hours of PE and out of hours school sport (Years 1-13)	6,565,106	62	66	41	50
% of pupils involved in intra-school competitive activities in the academic year (Years 1-13)	6,565,106	80	81	67	72
% of pupils regularly involved in intra-school competitive activities (Years 3-13)	5,443,332	53	56	26	32
% of pupils involved in inter-school competitive activities in the academic year (Years 1-13)	6,565,106	58	60	30	40
% of pupils regularly involved in inter-school competitive activities (Years 3-13)	5,443,332	26	30	14	21
Ability and Interest					
% of pupils registered as gifted and talented because of ability in PE/school sport (Years 5-13)	4,372,894	8	10	7	8
% of pupils involved in sport volunteering and leadership (Years 1-13)	6,565,106	24	22	25	25

Table 1. Gender difference in sports access. Data adapted from Quick et al., 2010.

BLAMING THE CURRICULUM

Teaching curriculums were often blamed for specifying game-based activities, but there's no physiological reason why in the UK boys play football and girls rounders, or in the USA soccer is considered a "girls sport" and baseball is "for boys".

The U.K. curriculum does not actually require specific sports, or ask for segregation (Quick et al., 2010), however it is almost universally interpreted as such, due to a focus on game-based learning.

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.

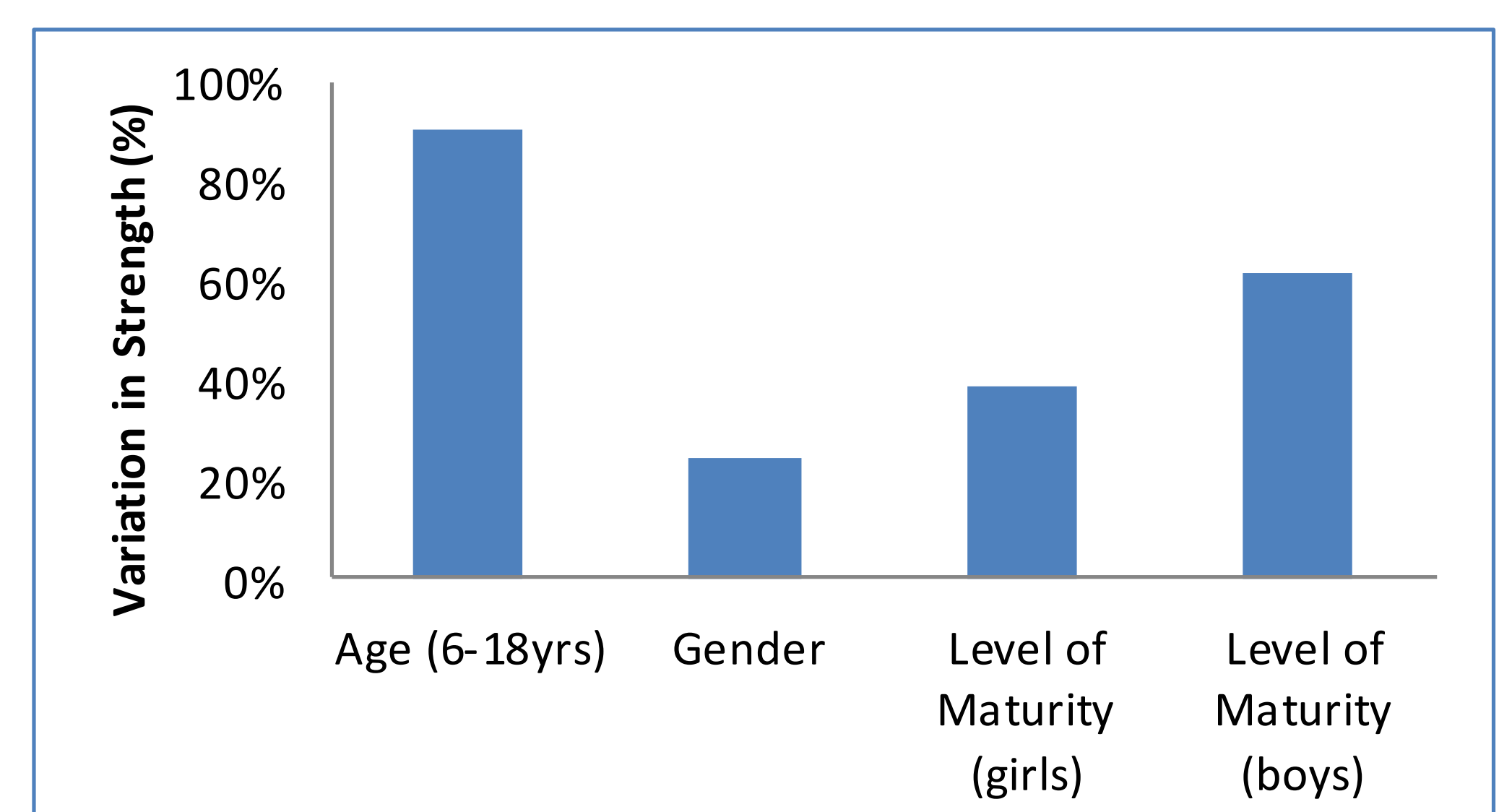


Figure 1. Variation in weight-normalised strength by different factors. Data adapted from Taeymans et al., 2009.

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.

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