

Students' Definitions of Ideal Femininity and Masculinity in School

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Abstract

Gender norms emerge as more or less dominant in different contexts and indicate simultaneous existences of various local gender regimes (Connell, 1999, 2002). The present paper is focused on how secondary school boys and girls in grade 9 in Sweden define gender norms through descriptions of popular and valued forms of gender in relation to different aspects of popularity in school (c.f. Frosh, Phoenix & Pattman, 2002). The analysis is based on two data sets, one qualitative and one quantitative. The first study includes classroom observations and interviews with 42 students. The second study includes a national survey of 3500 students. The theoretical emphases are on the multiple definitions of masculinity and femininity that are constructed and their hierarchical relations to each other.

The analysis of the students' definitions of popular and valued forms of gender indicated a strong and confident individual who is successful both in social relations and study attainment. Popular girls, as well as popular boys, were characterised as good-looking, socially extrovert, self-confident, sporty and mature people with large social networks. The norms mentioned were generally applicable both on boys and girls, although emphasis and combinations of norms might differ somewhat. For example, prowess in sports was stressed more for boys, but could also contribute to popularity for girls. The reverse was mentioned about appearance, where working with one's appearance was more accepted among girls but also acceptable for boys, if they balanced it with activities such as football. The results also stress the importance of balancing different aspects in correct ways, but not too much or too little. There seems to be pressure both on boys and girls to broaden their gender repertoires. The emphasis on the strong individual also indicates a discourse of individualisation.

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