

LADS & LADETTES IN SCHOOL: GENDER & THE FEAR OF FAILURE

CAROLYN JACKSON, 2006

CONTEXT

An issue of significant concern to educationalists in recent years has been the relative failure of boys compared to girls in schools.

One of the most popular theories is that boys have developed a 'laddish culture'. Moreover, it is claimed that some girls are also subscribing to this culture and developing anti-school attitudes. This study aims to examine laddishness and understand boys' motives for subscribing to such cultures. In addition, it is an attempt to explore whether girls really do adopt laddish attitudes and whether these attitudes impact on the work ethic of female students.

LINKS TO KEY DEBATES

This study is useful in an analysis of youth culture because it attempts to explain how pupil subcultures develop within schools. It is more important to the study of education though because it looks at how processes within school can affect the academic performance of boys. It shows how the interaction between school policy and the subcultures that develop within school combine to hamper the performance of males. Importantly, it also suggests how class inequalities may impact on school performance.

EVALUATION

The study mixes quantitative and qualitative methods effectively. It is representative in that a range of ethnicities and genders were part of the samples but the results may only reflect a specific northern culture because no schools from other parts of Britain were included. The questionnaire assumes that pupils will understand the same thing by the concept of 'laddishness', and share that understanding with the researchers and other pupils. This may not be the case. Additionally, there can be no certainty that pupils did not exaggerate their laddishness in order to gain status as part of the very process that the book describes.

FIND OUT MORE

Jackson, C. (2006) *Lads and Ladettes in School: Gender and the Fear of Failure*. Maidenhead: Open University Press

There is a review of the book on the Times Educational Supplement website. Go to www.tes.co.uk and search 'Reviews'.

Carolyn Jackson's web page is at www.lancs.ac.uk/staff/jacksoc2

METHODS

The data was based on two research projects, a pilot project funded by the Nuffield Foundation involving interviews with boys in two schools and a larger project funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) where both boys and girls were studied. In addition, the views of teachers were sought in the larger of the two projects. The projects shared the aims of exploring motives for laddish behaviours in schools.

The Nuffield project

Two secondary schools from the same town in the north-west of England were involved. Although both were mixed sex, one was oversubscribed and contained predominantly white students while the other was smaller, drew more students from deprived backgrounds and contained high numbers of students for whom English was a second language. In each school Year 9 pupils completed a questionnaire and 25 boys from each school were interviewed on the basis of their responses to the questionnaire. The semi-structured interviews lasted for 30 minutes and were conducted by a white British woman.

The ESRC project

Six secondary schools in the north of England were selected to ensure a mix of social classes and ethnicities. Again the focus was on year 9 pupils who completed three questionnaires, the first explored their academic goals and self-handicapping behaviours, the second academic performance and perceptions and the third views about laddishness and popularity. Pupils were required to respond to statements on a five point scale according to levels of agreement.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 153 pupils, 75 girls and 78 boys. Interviews were conducted by the author herself, each lasting about

30 minutes. The recordings were transcribed and then analysed with the help of computer packages which identified key themes: academic pressure, academic self-presentation, SATs, lads, 'ladettes'. Some of the key themes were further subdivided into ability, aggression, loudness, language, drinking and dress.

A range of teachers were also interviewed in each school after the respondent had been given a list of probable topics.

Social motives for laddishness

Laddishness refers to a specific form of masculine behaviour, though some respondents felt that 'lad' was synonymous with being 'normal'. Typically it was seen in terms of popularity, humour, sportiness, hardness, hanging out, the following of dress codes and not being seen to be making an effort at school. Importantly it was something that boys strived for, although being 'lad' should be effortless. Academic work was seen as feminine so lads avoided school work. There was a degree of overlap between what was seen as popular femininity and what was seen as 'ladette' behaviour. Girls felt under pressure to be popular and some even put on a show in order to avoid being seen as a 'swot'. Teachers found the ladettes to be far more troublesome than the lads. Lads may underachieve, but ladettes represented a new and dangerous femininity.

Academic motives for laddishness

Teachers and pupils are under increasing pressure to improve results. Pupils may respond by aiming to demonstrate achievement, or by avoiding demonstrations of their low ability. It was better to be seen as avoiding work than as a failure. Much laddishness could be seen in terms of avoiding revealing weakness. Laddish boys wished to avoid social failure by acting in a laddish way, and avoided academic failure by rejecting school work. They wished to hide work and effort. Girls were rejecting a traditional 'good girl' model which saw their academic success in terms of working hard rather than natural intelligence and instead looked for a feisty, 'sassy' image that did not go well with working hard.

Pressure to succeed

Some schools were using performance goals to encourage school success rather than encouraging students to gain pleasure from learning. Teachers sometimes promoted competition between students and exerted pressure on them. This led to stress and embarrassment. Those who achieved well liked the system, but the weaker students opted out and rejected school. Pressure to do well also came from parents. If parents pressurised, it was for the sake of the students, if schools pressurised, it was for the sake of the school or the concerns of the teachers for their own

reputations. Boys felt themselves to be under far more competitive pressure from their friends to do well in tests than girls. Both boys and girls felt it was important to be seen as clever, but to be seen to work hard was 'uncool'.

Uncool to be a 'geek'

Social status was judged in terms of popularity. Popularity for boys was gained through being good at sport and having a girlfriend. However, all students, regardless of ethnicity, gender or social class, felt that it was not cool to work. Few managed to achieve the double goal of being good in tests and also not being seen to work at it. The students who benefited most from the 'uncool to work' ethos were those who feared academic failure the most. Students would engage in self-handicapping behaviours that created barriers to academic success: avoiding deadlines, drug and alcohol use, lack of effort, sleeplessness, spending too much time on other activities. One trick was to misbehave in class and disrupt lessons. In this way, they did not have to feel stupid in front of their friends, they may even be able to sabotage the lesson for other students and stop them succeeding as well.

Balancing act

Many students managed to succeed through balancing how much work they needed to do to succeed with the behaviour needed to remain popular. Pupils would mess around in school and then catch up at home. They would use strategies to hide their work: sometimes even making excuses to their friends about not being able to go out so they could revise in secret. There was pressure from school for pupils to do work in their own time and pressure from friends to maintain a good social life. There may also be external pressures such as religious, sport or work commitments. Middle-class children, with access to the Internet and private space, were able to work in secret, for example using chatrooms and working simultaneously, whereas working-class children had to meet to maintain social contacts. Wealthy students could maintain a balancing act and appear cool through having access to branded fashion and mobile phones. In addition, physical attractiveness helped some pupils maintain cool whereas it was much harder for others.