

Presentation and analysis of studies about student distribution by gender in school physical education classes

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Abstract: The objective of this study is to introduce and analyze contemporary studies related to the distribution of students by gender in physical education classes and it is characterized as a qualitative research study of a descriptive nature. Content Analysis was used as a theoretical-methodological reference. Ten academic studies were used from 1990 to 2004. The analysis indicates that the authors are in favor of mixed groups, with the exception of one. This study defends the non-polarization of classes, aimed at taking better advantage of the work potential in mixed classes and those separated by gender.

Key Words: Physical Education. Teaching. Gender Identity. Revision Literature.

1 Introduction

The theme of this study has become a core issue in current times with Physical Education represented by sports, gymnastics, games, wrestling and dance coexisting at school. If Physical Education used to have objectives such as physical aptitude and performance, nowadays it has diverse content and objectives. If before it was recommended for physical activities to be carried out by students separated by gender, today there is great controversy about what is best: separate or unite the students by gender in Physical Education classes.

The objective of this study is to present and analyze contemporary studies about student distribution by gender in school physical education classes. We sought to address some theses and dissertations presenting core points related to the theme.

Two databases were consulted as a means to delimit the research: Brazilian Nucleus for Dissertations and Theses on Physical Education and Special Sports (NUTESSES) and the catalogue from the Gama Filho University Library, and we looked for studies carried out between 1990 and 2004. We found ten academic studies – seven Master's dissertations and three PhD theses – direct or indirectly related to the distribution of students by gender in school Physical Education classes.

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The study is characterized as qualitative research of a descriptive nature based on the documental analyses of dissertations and theses talk about the theme in question. We made use of Content Analysis as a theoretical-methodological reference (BARDIN, 1977). The consultation was carried out with the following intentions: i) know the researchers' proposals; ii) evaluate the degree of feasibility for each proposal, taking into account its theoretical and pedagogical support; iii) depending on the result of the first two, advance with an intervention proposal, to which new ingredients are added.

The core issue or problem of the study was: what do the studies present about student distribution by gender in school physical education classes?

2 Presentation and analysis of studies

The analyzed studies are described below in chronological order of publication:

Neíse Gaudencio Abreu (ABREU, 1990, p.7), in her Master's dissertation, supposes a model school: "I imagine a model school where the students are critical, participants, and aware of their role as citizens." She ascertained that students prefer classes separated by gender for Physical Education classes and she justifies this preference from social determinants. She says that in technical practice it is normal to separate, but it isn't in the humanist practice. She does not try to convince us to have mixed classes, but she discusses the problems that emerge between boys and girls during these classes. She suggests other criteria, besides gender, to distribute students in Physical Education classes, such as: levels of motor experience, odd and even roll call numbers and the offer of modalities. She considers that it does not make sense to separate the classes by gender since it is based on cultural stereotypes. She does not see any advantages in classes separated according to this criterion and says the integration between boys and girls justifies mixed classes. Her position goes against most faculty members and students she consulted because it is the latter's' consensus that the classes be separated by gender. The author defends the idea that with the same opportunities, girls can reach the same levels as boys. That seems difficult, almost impossible, since due to biological factors, girls have lower levels of strength, agility and resistance when compared to boys the same age.

Elaine Romero (ROMERO, 1990), in her PhD thesis on male and female stereotypes in faculty members, ascertained that the school reproduces a sexist ideology. She says that

outside school, boys are more encouraged to develop broad-based coordination, which favors them in school Physical Education classes, whereas girls are educated in a manner that reinforces submission, dependence and repression of the body, which impedes them from appropriately developing motor functions, leading to greater difficulties in classes. The Physical Education professor should be concerned about mitigating conflicting issues about culturally stereotyped sexual behavior. In classes, due to the fact the boys are more developed in motor function aspects, they begin to have more opportunities and receive more attention from professors. Classes with sports content thus tend to favor boys. When the class is a game, the boys generally want soccer and the girls dodge ball. The author says physical activities should not be conditioned on gender, which allows us to infer she is in favor of the same content for boys and girls. The author suggests father and mother teachers should strive to offer equal opportunities to their sons and daughters. She also suggests that at school gender is not the determining factor for curricular practice, and the school should review its practices in the sense of dealing with boys and girls equally. She says that in the researched universe since pre-school children are separated by gender for Physical Education.

According to our interpretation, having boys and girls perform the same activities often means to go against their gender identities. It is necessary to ponder what we should propose to boys and girls as content.

Maria do Carmo Saraiva-Kunz (SARAIVA-KUNZ, 1993), in her Master's dissertation, reports on discrimination between boys and girls in Physical Education and sports. Her interest in the research resulted from difficulty in giving classes to mixed groups. From her professional experience, she says that breaks in relationships between boys and girls in Physical Education and in sports are caused by sexual stereotyping. The conditioning of stereotypes led to discrimination of men's and women's social roles and left women in roles that are subordinate to men.

With regard to sports as core content for school Physical Education, the author says this reinforces gender patriarchal polarities and generates socialization with separate genders.

She recognized two current theories in school Physical Education: i) the progressive current that defends mixed classes and bets on education as a means to improve social relations; ii) the traditional current that defends classes separated by gender and postulates school Physical Education in terms of physical performance and skill. The

author introduces a proposal for pedagogical intervention based on co-education concepts, according to which, besides the discussions on gender issues, boys acquire the girls' culture and vice versa. According to Saraiva-Kunz (1993), boys and girls will only have equal opportunities in co-education classes.

The author ascertained that girls complain of boys because they are "aggressive" in their attitudes regarding the girls' errors. Boys also complain about them, saying they are too "fresh" and do not understand what they want in class. According to the author, these situations of conflict and discrimination between boys and girls can be corrected with strategies that privilege cooperation and solidarity.

Saraiva-Kunz (1993) defends women's rights and proposes a transforming Physical Education. Sports, school Physical Education's main content, can be practiced in mixed classes, but also in classes separated by gender, where school Physical Education can have other objectives, after all, the differences in strength, agility and resistance weigh heavily in favor boys.

According to our interpretation, the author's proposal should be considered and used, but adapted to the circumstances and interests of boys and girls. We should also privilege situations where boys and girls feel more at ease to develop.

Eustáquia Salvadora de Sousa (SOUSA, 1994), in her PhD thesis, questions the separation of students by gender, because she is totally in favor of mixed classes. She analyzes the organization of students by gender at every level of education, from 1887 to 1994, describing in each moment of history how the classes were organized and why there were mixed or separate classes. She says that during her childhood she enjoyed playing with dolls and soccer, but the second activity was a problem for her parents, who frowned upon it.

The author confirms a trend towards dichotomization in the distribution of students by gender and mentions a discipline in the undergraduate course curriculum that made use of mixed classes: "It is important to recall that since 70, recreation has been creating opportunities to experience activities practiced jointly [...] and, the 1990s systematically introduced gender relations as a study issue" (SOUSA, 1994, p.159). She reports that in 1987, state schools functioned with mixed Physical Education classes, and in 1990, teachers from municipal schools in Belo Horizonte mobilized against the implementation of mixed classes. The adoption of these classes in state and municipal schools led to a revolt among faculty members who, founded on legal aspects, biological and/or

psychological differences between boys and girls, and the need to maintain the quality of education, united to revoke the norm. Nevertheless, it was maintained.

One of the author's great concerns is with the denunciation of gender issues that would be facilitated in mixed classes. She proposes mixed education without discrimination, providing the opportunity for fun experiences to all students.

We see the author's proposal as positive; however, we understand that mixed classes is merely a way to distribute the students, bringing a few benefits. We understand there are other forms of distribution that can be explored in the sense of seeking varied experiences.

Greice Kelly de Oliveira (OLIVEIRA, 1996), in her Master's dissertation, verified that if on one hand separating students by gender favor greater sports performance, on the other hand, mixed classes favored maturing and integration.

The author discusses sexual and acquired differences. She says that many difference considered natural are socially constructed and these differences often deprive boys and girls from experiencing things together in Physical Education classes. She adds that mixed classes have the potential to better prepare the individual for life outside school, so long as the teacher gives the same attention to both boys and girls and considers them with their particularities, treating each one according to his/her individuality.

Based on data, the author reports that rather than create new values, the school reproduces gender relations. Soccer has been one of the main motivators for the difficulty in integrating boys and girls in Physical Education classes. The author did not consider the possibility of classes alternating the forms of distribution. She privileges social objectives in school Physical Education and says these should be better worked at in mixed classes.

However, in our opinion, we can also work on social objectives in classes separated by gender.

José Luiz Ferreira (FERREIRA, 1996), in his Master's dissertation, observed elementary school classes and ascertained they were comprised of three parts, where the teacher: 1st) talked to the students about the class; 2nd) directed a mixed activity; 3rd) divided boys and girls to play soccer and dodge ball, respectively.

When analyzing the data, Ferreira (1996) identified two categories: "contradiction" in the teacher and "participation" of the students. There was a contradiction between the teacher's discourse and practice, contributing towards discrimination between boys and

girls. According to Ferreira (1996, p.68), the teacher said it was important for boys and girls to practice activities jointly, but [...] “at the end of each class he denied this co-participation, separating the class by gender and having each group perform an activity supposedly understood as being feminine or masculine”. With regard to the second category, “participation” in Physical Education classes is greater for the male gender: while the boys at times participated in dodge ball, girls never participated in soccer. During classes, the teacher paid more attention to the boys' soccer than the girls' dodge ball.

The author argues that boys and girls should have the same opportunities for participation in the classes. He says this participation can only be achieved from an understanding of contradictions in capitalist society in search of an equal society from a gender point of view. He adds that Physical Education is sexist because it works with separate classes for certain activities and privileges one gender over another.

From a macro perspective of society, based on historical-dialectic materialism, Ferreira interprets gender relations in Physical Education classes as a mirror of capitalist relations where a minority detains power and exploits the majority. He proposes the teacher should have a transforming attitude in his/her pedagogical practice, seeking to discuss gender issues, among other things.

From a perspective centered on gender issues, Ferreira (1996) only considers mixed classes as the means to enable change. However, we see that in his observations he found a practice where the teacher alternated moments with classes separated by gender and moments with mixed classes. Is it possible that only mixed classes offer advantages? Is there no benefit offered students when the classes are separated by gender?

Helena Altmann (ALTMANN, 1998) studied a school with mixed classes for her Master's dissertation and ascertained that the boys went for soccer and the girls for volleyball. When the girls played soccer, some the boys would call them “Mary-men” from the stands. Among the problems experience in mixed classes, she cites: i) girls complained about boys because they did not pass the ball; ii) boys complained about girls because they made mistakes in the game; iii) girls complained that boys would kick the ball when playing volleyball; iv) girls complained about the boys' violence. In volleyball, boys touched the ball three times more than the girls. The author verified that the teacher changed the rules to increase the girls' participation in the game. This change broke the game's dynamics, and the girls' were blamed, because the teacher had changed the rules on their account.

According to Altmann (1998, p. 96), at school, “[...] the games simultaneously delimited and provided means to cross borders between masculinity and femininity and also permitted various relations between boys and girls.” Upon crossing borders, girls offered resistance to male domination. Altmann (1998) admits that teaching Physical Education to mixed classes has advantages and disadvantages. Students sometimes said classes separated by gender were better, and other times said mixed classes were better. Their tastes varied according to: i) the activity; ii) whoever was playing; iii) when the activity took place (class, recess, sports competitions); iv) number of participants (with many participants more conflicts occur). She concludes that the forms of organizing students by gender in Physical Education can vary according to circumstances and activities. She also admits the possibility of varying the forms of distribution of students by gender. She says mixed classes as well as classes separated by gender are well-accepted.

Eliete do Carmo Garcia Verbena (VERBENA, 2001), in her Master’s dissertation, ascertained that Physical Education classes for the 7th and 8th grades were given outside normal school hours to classes separated by gender.

The author says there is a distinction between what is expected from boys and girls. Girls are expected to have refined motor coordination, reinforcing the characteristics of harmony and delicateness. Boys are expected to practice physical activities that develop broad-based coordination, in an environment where it is not permitted to cry, as a form of training for work life.

According to Verbena (2001), faculty action is necessary in order to: i) break with the sexist ideology that dominates society; ii) develop respect between boys and girls; iii) combat discrimination and prejudice, mainly in relation to girls. The author ascertained the control of sports spaces by boys and verbal aggression by boys against girls, making work with mixed classes difficult due to a machismo ideology that governs the masculinized sports world. It shows how difficult it is to implement actions with mixed classes in Physical Education, especially when the content is sports.

In the interview with students, she asked what they thought about mixed classes. Most of the girls were against them, and most of the boys in favor. Those in favor of the mixed classes presented the following arguments: i) change/ help; ii) pleasure; iii) respect; iv) varied content. Those who were against mixed classes, girls in the majority, presented the following justifications: i) different interests; ii) aggressiveness; iii) male ability/ female inability; iv) lack of privacy; v) sport fitness.

Cátia Pereira Duarte (DUARTE, 2003, p.83), in her Master's dissertation, reports: "[...] why are class activities still separated according to gender?"

In classes that should have been mixed, she saw classes separated by gender for activities; "[...] all of the teachers, although conceiving of their classes as mixed, prefer to separate boys from girls" (DUARTE, 2003, p.94). They justify this by saying the differences interfere in the learning process. Although the Municipal Secretary of Education determines the classes should be mixed, separation prevails. Three out of four faculty members separated the students. One of the reasons was to not expose the girls' lack of skills to ridicule by the boys. Another alleged reason was that the boys are rough and the girls babied. When the educator asked the students to carry out group activities, the boys gathered together and the girls gathered together.

The author defends mixed classes in a convincing manner. However, in our view, there are several reasons that justify both forms of student distribution.

Sissi Aparecida Martins Pereira (PEREIRA, 2004), in her PhD thesis, found a preference for classes separated by gender for fun activities, although the school instructs the faculty that the classes should be mixed. Data gathering revealed that most of the class structures show the separation of boys and girls for the activities. The author ascertained that both of them occupied different spaces in fun activities at recess. Few boys played with girls in the schoolyard, and the latter played even less with boys on the soccer field.

The author is in favor of mixed classes and criticizes separation:

The school plays a fundamental social role and separating Physical Education classes by gender is cause for concern. If the students are frequently asking for this separation, the acritical conduct of the teacher ends up permitting the dissemination of these differences. (PEREIRA, 2004, p.29)

We understand that the teacher can satisfy the students' desires. An important fact is the preference of the majority of students for school Physical Education classes separated by gender. Since motivation is an important factor in the teaching-learning process, teachers can take advantage of the tendency for boys and girls to do activities separated by gender to develop their classes, mixed or separated.

Ability plays a core role in the study: "Boys do not want to play with girls nor the least skillful" (PEREIRA, 2004, p.29). She says the separation between boys and girls

begins in society and it is perpetuated in school. Boys have different tastes than girls and girls have different tastes than boys, which can be ascertained in their behavior. If we only work on mixed activities are we not restricting male and female potential, which is intensely expressed in school Physical Education classes? Certainly some objectives are much better developed in separate groups. Our proposal is to use mixed and separate groups to explore every possibility of these classes.

In order to conclude document analysis, charts 1 and 2 show the authors' positions regarding the distribution of students by gender in Physical Education classes and the sources of information they used.

Position	Abre	Rome	Sarai	Sousa	Olive	Ferre	Altm	Verb	Duar	Perei
Defends mixed classes only			X	X	X	X		X	X	X
Defends mixed and separate classes, depending on the circumstances							X			
Defends mixed classes and other forms of student division with the exception of classes separated by gender	X									
Has no explicit position, but permits the inferring a preference for mixed classes		X								

Chart 1 – Position of authors regarding the distribution of students in physical education classes

Sources	Abre	Rome	Sarai	Sousa	Olive	Ferre	Altm	Verb	Duar	Perei
Teachers		X								
Teachers and students	X					X	X			X
Students			X		X			X	X	
Documents, life history of six teachers, testimonials by teachers, students, coordinators, administrative technicians and iconography				X						

Chart 2 – Sources of information used by the authors.

3 Final Considerations

The analyzed studies bring to school Physical Education the gender issues that arise in class, such as gender stereotypes, content discrimination for boys and girls and gender discrimination. The authors explicitly defend mixed classes, with the exception of Helena Altmann (1998), who considers the possibility of variation in the ways to organize students by gender. They indicate a new context in school Physical Education where classes separated by gender are contested and mixed classes defended. We call attention to the fact that although almost all of the studies analyzed herein defend mixed classes, Durand-Delvigne and Duru-Bellat (2003) reported contrary results: in their study, girls tend to underestimate their potential, inhibited by the presence of the boys. This infers that at times mixed work may be most indicated whereas at other times separated classes are more appropriate.

This study defends the non-polarization of classes, aimed at taking better advantage of the work potential in mixed classes and those separated by gender.

Several studies manifest resistance on the part of teachers and students regarding mixed classes. Even after several years in which mixed classes have been offered to teachers by schools, a survey by Louzada and Devede (2004) with High School students found student answers in favor of classes separated by gender. Girls justified separated classes because the boys are rough and discriminate, whereas the boys said with separate classes the intensity was much greater.

We do not position ourselves in a polarized manner in face of the forms of class organization by gender. We propose non-radicalization as the best way since both forms of organization bring advantages to the students. School Physical Education should seek plural education, and for such, it must explore every instrument, strategy and methodology to collaborate towards that end.

Apresentação e análise de trabalhos acerca da distribuição dos alunos por sexo nas aulas de educação física escolar

Resumo: O objetivo deste ensaio é apresentar e analisar trabalhos contemporâneos que se relacionam com a distribuição dos alunos por sexo nas aulas de educação física e se caracteriza como pesquisa qualitativa de caráter descritivo. Como referencial teórico-metodológico, utilizou-se a Análise do Conteúdo. Foram utilizados dez trabalhos acadêmicos no período de 1990 até 2004. A análise indica que os autores são a favor das turmas mistas, com exceção de um. Defende-se neste estudo a não polarização das turmas, com vistas a um melhor aproveitamento dos potenciais do trabalho com turmas mistas e separadas por sexo.

Palavras-Chave: Educação física. Ensino. Identidade de gênero. Literatura de revisão.

Presentación Y Análisis De Trabajos A Cerca De La Distribución De Los Alumnos Por Sexo En Las Clases De Educación Física

Resumen: El objetivo de este ensayo es presentar y analizar trabajos contemporáneos que son relativos a la distribución de los alumnos por sexo en las clases de educación física. Este estudio se caracteriza como una pesquisa cualitativa de carácter descriptivo. Como referencial teórico-metodológico, se utilizó el Análisis del Contenido. Fueran encontrados diez trabajos académicos en el período de 1990 hasta 2004. El análisis indicado que los autores son a favor de los grupos mixtos, con excepción de uno. Se defiende en este estudio la no-polarización de los grupos, con vistas a una mejor utilización de los potenciales del trabajo con grupos mixtos y separados por sexo.

Palabras-clave: Educación física. Enseñanza. Identidad de género. Literatura de revisión.

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Received on: 5/8/2007
Approved on: 2/11/2008