

Physical Education, gender and school: an analysis of academic production

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Abstract: The objective of the study was to analyze the arguments that support the statement of discrimination against girls in classes of physical education, in the production of research of sensu stricto programs in physical education of CAPES theses database. Five studies were identified and analyzed from the analytical categories: purposes of the research; discrimination in physical education classes; sporting and sexism, and the concept of sexism. The research, on one hand, showed that the school system reinforces sexism but, on the other, points out that gender is not the only factor in inclusion and exclusion.

Key-words: Physical education. Gender Identity. Prejudice. Academic Dissertations as Issue.

1 INTRODUCTION

One of the main tasks of educators is to build a pedagogical model which makes the access to school activities more democratic. The pedagogical challenge is to reflect on the differences and to promote equality, without stigmatizing those involved. Science is fundamental in this process. Many discourses and actions adopted in schools have as a background theoretically formulated prescriptions which are spread through academic publications and debates originated

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by scientific production.

The research in the field of education and of school physical education (MOURA; MOURÃO, 2006) very intensely and constantly points to reflections about several categories of inequalities. We highlight those which refer to the issues of gender (ABREU, 1990; OLIVEIRA, 1996; DURAN, 1999; DUARTE, 2003; PEREIRA, 2004), establishing significant impact in the production of the field. Those researchers tried to discuss the difference in opportunities between boys and girls and announced that the classes of physical education enabled the production of gender inequalities. All this movement was responsible for consolidating the understanding that the school institution could, covertly, reproduce discriminating stereotypes which existed in society.

Taking as a reference the visibility of gender research in school physical education, we directed our analysis to understanding the formulation of departure questions, taking a look at the construction of the main arguments which consolidated the conclusions of the research. Our intention is, most of all, to provide continuity to the gender discussions produced in Brazilian physical education.

2 METHODOLOGY

We conducted a survey of theses and dissertations produced in *sensu stricto* post-graduate programs in physical education in the period between 1990 and 2005.¹ We collected the research through the theses database from the Núcleo Brasileiro de Dissertações e Teses em Educação Física e Educação Especial (NUTESES) and from the Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior (CAPES). We used the combination of words gender and school physical

¹ The clipping of period was due to the identification of the first researches, 1990, and because the survey happened in 2006.

education; gender, sexism and school, and we found seven studies. These used the term gender in the sense of social-historical differences between men and women. The inclusion factor was to see the integral studies. We had access to five of them and we prioritized identifying and describing how the authors² supported their arguments. We referred to Booth, Colomb and Williams (2000), who indicate that a good argument includes: the statement, the evidence and the restriction. A statement is that which we want the others to believe; the evidences are the reasons for which they should believe; the restriction is used to make the statements and the evidences more accurate, stipulating the conditions in which the argument is supported.

This work shows limitations which are justifiable. First of all, we opted for analyzing only the production of sensu stricto post-graduate programs in physical education, even though we recognize the extensive production in programs from similar areas. The option is justified, above all, by the feasibility of complete reading of works, ensuring respect to the production and to the understanding of the arguments. Besides that, we privileged the production where can be found, besides students, teachers-advisors with degree in physical education. Hence, we focused the debate on the scientific production and in the pedagogical intervention of our area, with the aim of developing it.

Secondly, we used the NUTESES and CAPES databases. In them are theses and dissertations produced in Brazilian post-graduate courses. We considered it unlikely that any study published in the period from 1990 to 2005 would be out of this access, but this was not guaranteed. We know that the debate on gender is dynamic and intense, therefore, a number of works have appeared and has shown new paths. However, the clipping of this review is relevant and records a seminal period of the thematic, with only one

² All the analyzed researches were produced by women.

doctoral study, following our purpose of contributing for the debates of future production.

3 DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

Four categories were used for the analysis of researches: a) the purposes of researches; b) discrimination and the classes of physical education; c) sporting and sexism; d) the concept of sexism.

3.1 THE PURPOSES OF RESEARCHES

The analysis of researches revealed a recurrence in the purposes of investigation, which most of the time assumes the existence of sexism and discrimination in physical education classes and makes an effort to confirm this assumption. Bachelard (2003) calls this phenomenon “first opinion” – when beliefs and values are admitted as reality and, with that, the object of study is conditioned to the view of the researcher. Such attitude makes us distant from reality, as it predicts the legitimising of the researcher’s belief.

Abreu’s (1990) research is the oldest and it becomes a reference for the gender theme and school physical education. We may say that it is the founding text and, therefore, it is mentioned in the other researches. The study, supposedly based on the readings and professional intervention of the author, it reports her research purpose in the following way:

I see that both in the technical practice as in the human practice of the physical education professional there are discriminations. They are disguised as simple separation of classes in female and male groups. It is worth observing that when I talk about discrimination it is not only regarding the girls; but also of a discriminating attitude to both genders, as pre-established attitudes are expected from the boys. [...] Both boys and girls will prefer such division, as they are

already impregnated with discriminatory values coming from the social constraints. (ABREU, 1990, p. 13-14)

The author points, only through her experiences, but without the systematization of empiric data, to the existence of discrimination and sexism in school physical education classes. The division of the class in two groups, taking as reference the gender of students, would be a characteristic of the discriminating process. Still in the purpose, Abreu proposes as a way of overcoming those mechanisms of discrimination the use of mixed groups, because, according to her narrative, “[...] maybe it would contribute to a better integration and mutual help for the social coexistence regarding the existing conditions and the absorption of contents” (ABREU, 1990, p. 16). It can be noticed that they had already found beforehand the solution for the discrimination conflicts and the answer for the questions. Abreu does not present evidences which enable the understanding of how she diagnosed the phenomenon of discrimination and based on what parameters she built the proposal for mixed classes.

With the same assumption, Oliveira (1996, p. 40) uses a kind of calling to declare his political position:

For those who recognize and who are opposed to the sexist values which have been conveyed in school Physical education, and who have been concerned with the progress in the area. [...] some assumptions will be presented which guide this study and indicate the possibility that mixed groups would contribute or not for the educational process of the student.

Duarte (2003, p. 4) also evidences a willingness to find expected results:

I understand that all those aspects result in the construction of selection criteria between boys and girls, I think that in the team choices we have the representation of the

power relations in Physical education classes. This selection interiorizes the domination criteria and perpetuates a classification, which is intrinsic and gives strength to the power of some - the boys – and at the same time reaffirms the failure of others – the girls.

The author starts from the idea that the rhythm of the class and criteria of selection are dictated by male standards of performance in physical-sports activities. From the beginning of the argument, she declares that there is sexism present in the classes.

The purposes of any research are guided by their research questions and/or hypothesis(es). According to Bachelard (2003, p. 18), it is fundamental for us to formulate good questions, because “[...] all scientific knowledge is the answer to a question”. The recurring questions in those researches try to check if the conservative values are being kept and/or reproduced in physical education classes (ABREU, 1990); to which extent the fact of joining boys and girls in physical education classes ensures the achievement of affective-social objectives (OLIVEIRA, 1996); how does physical education reproduce gender stereotypes in their classes (DURAN, 1999); if the girl students feel excluded from the physical education classes (DUARTE, 2003); what are the gender stereotypes present in the classes (PEREIRA, 2004). The questions that motivated the researches demonstrate the intention to confirm an imagined truth. The way they are formulated, the questions direct the view specifically to what they want to see and with that the opportunity for reflection, in a deeper and more critical way, over the phenomenon in question.

The analyzed research shows the assumption of sexism in school physical education classes. There is a “first opinion” (BACHELARD, 2003), previous to the collected data, that there is sexism and that the classes reinforce this phenomena.

Thus, the effort of the research would be to identify where sexism is hidden.

It is not intended to advocate in favor of absolute neutrality between the researcher and the object of study, because not even the most positivist discipline currently seems to admit this possibility. However, Becker (1997) states that between radical criticism and good research the second will always have a higher possibility of promoting social changes, because it is by a better understanding of reality that paths are open to transform it. A fundamental effort which we could propose would be to produce a strangeness³ about ourselves, before the studied object itself.

The questions should aim at contradiction to overcome that, Bachelard calls “conservative instinct”. It is necessary for the research, both on gender as in any other field, to be able to question its assumptions, because only in this way would we be doing an exercise to validate its foundations to develop knowledge. To doubt the existence of sexism in physical education classes is the starting point.

3.2 DISCRIMINATION AND THE PHYSICAL EDUCATION CLASSES

The analyzed research has as the main argument the existence of discrimination in physical education classes. However, the analyses lack evidence. Let us see.

Duarte (2003), already in the first page of the research, before starting the study, describes a visit he did to a school and makes the following remarks:

A problem that I detected soon after the beginning of classes in the investigated school was that the corporeality produced and reflected in the School Physical education reproduces the model of

³ to doubt what our eyes see; to question what seems to be normal. Urban anthropology proposes that we treat the events of our daily life as the first investigators would see the isolated people. See, for example, Velho (1994).

discrimination of male and female roles existing in society, keeping the male standards as reference. (DUARTE, 2003, p. 1)

We can notice that the author, already in the first page of her research and from a non-systematic, occasional observation acknowledges the existence of gender discrimination. In fact, it is observed that the need for immediate certainty, according to what Bachelard (2003) points out, attracts our interpretations of reality. In this context, the author reports the discrimination falling into a simplification of the complex phenomenon of discrimination, from the observation of one only class.

Oliveira (1996) and Pereira (2004), at times, act as if complaining against the school, the teacher, the sports and the sports performance. In general, the authors operate those complaints with macro-structural analyses, as they indicate that the discrimination is a consequence of what society imposes on the individual, eliminating the possibility of the individual manipulating the society.

Pereira (2004, p. 141), when observing the dynamics of the school, criticizes the line formation divided by gender, or the only line, which, according to the author, gives preference to the girls at the front. On the other hand, he justified the formation of lines as a solution to keep the organization and the control of children. Pereira concludes “[...] that the school favors the group divisions by gender, reinforcing them through attitudes, words and/or rituals which instill in the children the idea of separation”.

The effort in noticing the gender discrimination in any social phenomenon may blur the vision of the researcher. In the analyzed researches, the purpose of noticing gender discrimination in physical education classes was transformed in a strait jacket which darkened more than brought light to the debate.

The development of scientific knowledge has as one of its objectives to accomplish generalizations which may better explain determined phenomena in the society. However, the generalizations cannot be confused with “general doctrines” (BACHELARD, 2003). While generalizations should be used when there is enough empirical evidence to raise general hypotheses; general doctrines are appropriations which become theoretical and political positions of the researcher without deeper questioning. All the researchers, certainly, have a larger affinity with some theoretical assumptions; however, theoretical assumptions should help us in providing views about a phenomenon, not in looking for gaps to impose a statement.

3.3 SPORTING AND SEXISM

In the analyzed research, there is an established and announced knowledge that points to sports and “sporting”⁴ as an exclusively male practice, which contributes to gender discrimination and sexism in physical education classes. According to Duarte (2003, p. 3), “[...] The preferred contents are sports and never dance and gymnastics, making the girls accept this. Physical education discipline as a space of training, and not of learning”. Pereira (2004, p. 93) states that “The body’s ability in sports, mainly in our culture, is still seen as something for men”. Duran (1999) indicates sporting as the main thing responsible for the attribution of those stereotypes:

This sporting in physical education contributes to reinforcing stereotypes and perpetuating characteristics which have been wrongly linked to each sex, excluding the woman from its practice and causing her demotivation to performing physical activities. (DURAN, 1999, p. 36)

⁴ In the analyzed research, sporting is understood as a trend to exclusively teach sports in physical education classes.

When sports are converted in the main content of physical education, this discipline is forced to become discriminating and sexist, as the sport has been characterized as an activity that is proper for men and a means to reinforce their “virility”. (DURAN, 1999, p. 88)

We may notice that those arguments are immersed in generalizations, delimitations are lacking to help us understand the relationship between sporting and discrimination. The statements lose force, for example, when other sports are thought about, such as rhythmic gymnastics.

All the analyzed research states that one of the causes of discrimination in physical education classes is the sports. No arguments could be found to support gender as the main category for the exclusion of girls from the activities; on the other hand, there is a series of reports which stress that availability and skills for the sports practice are predominant for the inclusion of girls in the classes. The teaching of sports is identified as a static phenomenon, which cannot go through appropriations.

Pereira’s report (2004, p. 12) demonstrates the evidence of the performance and initiative as significant factors in female participation in sports activities:

During a football class on a sand court, a girl student from the 2nd grade of primary school told me that she didn’t know how to play football. I asked: why? And the answer was that, in the condominium where she lived, the boys would not allow the girls to play football, because they disturbed the game because of their lack of skill. I suggested then that they should risk occupying their game space, questioning and insisting until they gave them an opportunity for them to take part in the game. The next week, when she returned to the physical education class, the girl said that my suggestion had worked and that she and the other colleagues were

playing football almost every evening together with the boys.

In this description, the only fact that prevented the girls from taking part in the football game was the lack of a more forceful initiative from them to take part in the activities. When the research narrows its view under the school space, the author makes it clear that gender is not the main category of exclusion.

I observed that the girls never play football with them, with the exception of one of them who is accepted in this activity because, besides knowing how to play, she is willing to take part in the activity with them. (PEREIRA, 2004, p. 81)

In the court there was a football game for boys going on, with one girl taking part. One student from the group said that the girl was always playing *because the boys allow her to, because she knows how to play and she looks like a man.* (PEREIRA, 2004, p. 92, italics added)

The categories of gender and performance are always combined in the presented reports. Abreu (1990) states during all the argument the existence of gender discrimination. However, when we start the analysis, it reveals a somewhat different perspective from what was pointed at the beginning of the research:

I am optimistic to see that it is possible to reverse this framework because the prejudices are not so strong, in fact, they are more concentrated concerning the progress of classes and the technical performance (sports abilities and physical conditioning). (ABREU, 1990, p. 83).

Afterwards, Abreu assumes openly that the reasons for inclusion and exclusion of boys and girls in physical education classes are more concentrated in the ability and less in the opposition regarding the sex of participants: “[...] the dominant factor of incompatibility of sexes in mixed classes is

the unbalance of abilities” (ABREU, 1990, p. 54). It states that discrimination occurs because of ability, because when the girls demonstrate athletic competence, they are accepted by the boys. According to the author, “[...] it is worth remembering that it is possible to reverse the conservative framework in which the physical education classes are placed, because the prejudices are not strong” (ABREU, 1990, p. 154).

This study from Abreu, because it is the first research of gender in school physical education, becomes a source of dialogue for neophytes, and the most interesting thing is that the research afterwards would take possession only of the initial discussion, i.e., the main data of its field research is forgotten or omitted in the analyses of later research.

Duarte (2003) describes that in the researched schools there are three typical groups of girls: a) the ones that take part; b) the ones who try to take part and c) the ones that boycott the classes. In her research, the groups that are excluded from the activity are not only identified by sex, but by their sporting performance. The author improves on this as compared to other research, when she highlights that in all the schools investigated there is a resurgence of this classification. Although it advances in the identification of distinct groups of girls and their relationship with the activity in physical education classes, it is lost in the denouncing critics of sexism and gender discrimination, in which she was supported during all the research. The distinction of the students, with their different appropriations of sports practices and the regularity of types in different schools, should announce new points of view for the understanding of the existing differences in the school physical education.

Maybe, if we temporarily abandon the belief that there are barriers for the participation of women, concentrating on the girls who take part in the activities considered as reification of the male domain, we could have a better understanding of the factors that approach and move each person away from the sports practice. In the analyzed

production, some theoretical positions take the force of pedagogical revelations. Thus, according to research, the separated classes are always negative and mixed classes are defended as the only possible improvement. Collective sports are an evil to be fought in the physical education curriculum. In this context, the co-educative class becomes the necessary strategy for overcoming the unequal gender relations. Only the mixed or co-educative class would be able, through the pedagogically organized conflict, to ensure the opportunity of participation for girls in collective sports of confrontation, dominated by boys. Oliveira, states about this point

[...] it is appropriate to highlight that these are not universal and unchangeable characteristics, and that besides the existence of boys and girls who are far from those behavior standards, it can be observed that boys are well accepted by girls when they show they are kind and friendly, the same way that boys accept those girls who demonstrate ability in games and motor tasks. (OLIVEIRA, 1996, p.44).

Even observing the existence of girls who effectively take part in sports activities with the boys, Oliveira will not abandon the ratification that the main category of exclusion is the fact that they are women. In the quotation, we can notice that the author launches the hypothesis that there can be other categories of exclusion of girls, but during all the argument she does not invest in this point and keeps the gender as the main exclusion category.

Besides the mixed, co-educative classes the research exposes the diversity of contents at the expense of the learning of sports technique from the male domain, which is referred to in research as *esportivização*. Nobody would defend a manifesto against the diversity in curriculum contents of physical education, but it is necessary to point that, following the argumentative thought of the research, this strategy would be founded in the favoring of contents in the female domain, to increase the opportunity for the participation of girls. This

position seems to be victimist, because if we think about the school physical education as a space for the appropriation of leisure culture, we would be preparing the girls to continue being unprepared for occupying the valued spaces of collective games. In other words, we could ask: if the practice of collective sports is a power instrument and women are a minority,⁵ wouldn't it be more transforming to insist on the teaching of those modalities for all the girls in the school? Wouldn't it be interesting to work with separate groups so that they would be able to better approach the content which oppresses them?

3.4 THE CONCEPT OF SEXISM

A gap is observed in the analyzed studies about the discussion of the concept of sexism. It is clear that the authors express this idea as a negative practice. However, we only find one definition of the term in a footnote, in Pereira's study (2004), which explains the separation between sexes. If the concept of sexism present in the researches refers exclusively to the separation between the sexes, we could say that they are fragile statements because they do not argue the concept with its delimitations and reservations. Toilets and dressing rooms in public facilities of our cities, for example, are separated by sex, but still they are not reported for a sexist act. On the other hand, there are movements connected to quotas (such as the exclusive right for places in a wagon in the trains and subways, or the number of representatives in political parties) which have as an objective to ensure the equality of conditions between men and women. Looking to our specific field of knowledge, the question is: What can we think about the proliferation of female gyms or of the women football groups in the sports leisure, which prefer the unisexual space? These issues point to the need for a deeper reflection on the concept of sexism, for its application in the scientific questions and the pedagogical ones of physical education.

⁵ Both of number and of power quotas in the interaction with men.

A scientific concept, according to Bachelard (2003, p. 76), serves to explain a situation, in a given condition, that can provide the capacity for us to name a phenomenon, making it effective for the improvement of knowledge. However, the author himself stresses that “[...] the fertility of a scientific concept is proportionate to the power of deformation”. When gender and discrimination start explaining all the situations of the relationship between the sexes, they lose their power of improving in knowledge, as they did so well when they entered the scientific scenario. The concept of gender in that research became the general knowledge that explains and solves all.

We reflect with Bachelard (2003) that a conception should come together with its concept. Trying to limit and doubt the concepts which surround the gender studies may open out eyes to apparent issues which we cannot identify. How to understand, for example, the interpretation of sexism facing a reality that seems to be a negotiation from individual choices? Why, even with strong evidence of sports ability as a category of exclusion and inclusion of both sexes, the research insists on pointing to a phenomenon such as sexism? For what reason is the deviation from the regulatory female model so apparent in the researched data, but so difficult to be treated by the authors?

4 CONSIDERING A NEW STUDY AGENDA ON GENDER AND PHYSICAL EDUCATION

We suggested new research on the relationship between gender and sports ability. In the terms of Magnani (2002), the analyzed research observes the phenomenon of the physical education class from outside and from far away. I.e., the researcher receives information from the object of research only through the collection of data. Magnani suggests that the distance from the observer to the object would contribute to an unbalancing of the construction of a more autonomous

position. The decision for the choice of valid information by the researcher for the research may lead to many paths, according to its values, ideologies and the most immediate context produced in the scenario where the decision happens. Fonseca (1999, p. 66), when analyzing this attempt of distant criticism, emphasizes that, in the absence of a concrete dialogue between researcher and social actor, the effect of “[...] submitting all the speeches to the same analysis paradigm is to favor the symbolic violence exercised by the dominant classes”. We believe that it would be interesting to conduct research that would try to closely understand the relationship of social actors from inside, as is suggested by Magnani (2002).

Far from generalizations or from not changing the critics towards one only direction, we understand that we need a closer approach and from inside the phenomena that bothers us. To closely understand such phenomena and from inside means to look for the problem of the research in a more open way, expanding the possibility for answers. At the same time, it is coming closer to the sense of observation of the individuals, to their daily interactions and the reasons for their most objective actions. As highlighted by Oliven (2002, p. 11), the study about the culture of urban groups, given the existing contradictions in complex societies, “[...] it is necessary to be radical, in the etymological sense of the term, i.e., to look for the root of the studied phenomena, without any fear of challenging taboos and well established knowledge”.

Considering the complexity of the phenomenon in question and the current fast social changes, it would be important to stop the search for the proof of an absolute discrimination and try to understand, considering particularly each institution, at which point each one of the individuals involved in the plot is established in the power relationships. It is necessary, specifically in gender studies, to form a new concept, different from the proposed sexism, which will be able to explain gender distinctions in sports practices.

5 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In the analyzed researches, we found a trend in argument. There is an initial position identifying discrimination. The research states that there is sexism in school physical education and that sports are the main reinforcing instrument.

The authors of the analyzed research start from the proposal to find the discrimination. They find and reinforce the argument of genderization with a few empirical evidences. They fall many times into generalizations to argument around the negative effects of sexism caused by sports. The arguments have strong statements, with fragile evidence to support gender as a category of exclusion. There is a series of reports in the analyzed research stressing that availability and competence in sports practice were more defining for the condition of inclusion of some girls and exclusion of some boys. The participation of women in sports is frequently observed, even in football, but most of the time the researchers treated it as a meaningless data, a deviation. Those findings characterize the distorted vision on the reality, caused by the difficulty in overcoming epistemological obstacles.⁶

The analyzed researches correspond to an important effort to give voice to a determined segment which is found, in some contexts, with smaller power quotas. However, scientific research cannot assume exclusively the political plan at the expense of its commitment with the analysis, because the reporting of its results has meaningful implications in the pedagogical formation and intervention of physical education professionals. The cause of equality among all the people should always be put ahead of all purposes of pedagogical intervention, and the research in physical education is fundamental to emphasize the paths to be followed. Because we understand that this path is complex and dynamic, we

⁶ In Bachelard (2003) terms.

agree with the idea that, when we doubt, we promote debate and we create opportunities far beyond the establishment.

Educação Física, gênero e escola: uma análise da produção acadêmica

Resumo: O objetivo do estudo foi analisar as argumentações que sustentam a afirmação de discriminação das meninas nas aulas de educação física, na produção das pesquisas dos programas *sensu stricto* em educação física do banco de teses da CAPES. Cinco estudos foram identificados e analisados a partir das categorias analíticas: propostas das pesquisas; discriminação nas aulas de educação física; a esportivização e o sexismo, e o conceito de sexismo. As pesquisas, de um lado, denunciam o sistema escolar por reforçar

o sexismo mas, por outro, apontam que gênero não é o único fator de inclusão e exclusão.

Palavras-chave: Educação física. Identidade de gênero. Preconceito.

Dissertações Acadêmicas como Assunto.

Educación Física, género y escuela: un análisis de la producción académica

Resumen: Este artículo analiza la producción académica sobre género y educación física escolar de los programas *stricto sensu* del área. El objetivo fue analizar los argumentos que sustentan la afirmación de discriminación de las niñas en las clases. Recolectamos las obras a través del banco de tesis de CAPES. Analizamos cuatro categorías: las propuestas de las pesquisas; discriminación y las clases de educación física; la deportivización el se- xismo; y el concepto de sexismo. Las pesquisas denuncian el sexismo, pero apuntan que género no es el único factor de inclusión y de exclusión, lo que sugiere un análisis más de cerca en el cotidiano de las prácticas deportivas.

Palabras clave: Educación física. Identidad de género, Prejuicio. Tesis Académicas como Asunto.

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