Book Review


The "equality" problem remains a central issue in scientific discussion, as well as in the politics of education and schooling in the United Kingdom. During the 1970's the conviction grew that equality was not only a matter of "race" and class, but also of gender. Researchers demonstrated that both the official and the hidden curriculum contributed to a gender-specific socialization which leads to gendered identities and support of a gender-order based on the sexual division of labor. Schooling, thus, contributed to the reproduction of ideologies and stereotypes of masculinity and femininity. Although physicality and the body are of great importance in the construction of the gender-order, physical education has received little attention with respect to the discussion of schooling and equality and feminist theory and politics.

With her book, Sheila Scraton, closes a considerable gap in the literature and contributes to an understanding of the socialization of girls and the important theoretical debates on gender-specific socialization. She also contributes to our understanding of the structure of the gender-order as a whole. This book was written, not only because of a research interest, but also because of practical experience as a teacher. Many unanswered questions relating to gender and the teaching of girls' physical education were raised and needed to be answered. Major questions were in the area of understanding the discrepancies between sporting practice and feminist ideas. This connection between personal commitment and academic interest by the author proved to be very fruitful, in that the key empirical and theoretical questions considered in her book were those of relationships between theory and practice.

The author confronts the reader in the beginning of the book with an overview of feminist theories and their application to physical education. The "theory-chapter" starts with a very important introduction: "Gender is a social construct and not a biological universality." Here, therefore, it is emphasized that the body is the basis for powerful stereotypes and dominant ideologies. Physicality and physical education must be central to feminist theory and politics. Scraton suggests that it is important not to compartmentalize theories too rigidly into liberal, radical Marxist or socialist theories. Rather, she suggests that all approaches be used in order to explain and understand the power-relations between women and men, and between women of a different class or "race". Although it is useful to discuss these quite general theories and to apply them to
physical education, it would have been more helpful to identify a specific theoretical approach.

We are alerted to the fact that contemporary issues must be placed in an historical context. It was necessary, therefore, to include a short overview of the foundations and development of girls' physical education. The author shows convincingly that, in spite of the "different but equal" ethos prevalent in girls' schooling, physical education of girls was always considered to be less important than physical education for boys. In her discussion of girls' physical education, Scraton focused upon three areas: physical capacity, motherhood and sexuality. The "different but equal" ethos shaped the physical education (PE) of girls, that is, it was oriented on the "nature" of females and the myth of the female as the weaker sex. By means of a two-stage research project, the author focused the remainder of the book on determining if the ideologies identified as dominant in the historical development of girls' PE continue to be present in contemporary teaching.

In order to investigate contemporary PE, the author conducted structured open-ended interviews with PE advisers, heads of girls' PE departments and other staff. After analyzing the interview material, Scraton identified strong "common sense" assumptions and stereotypes of perceived different "natural" physical abilities of girls and boys. She believed that these assumptions and stereotypes directly influenced the teaching process. Many teachers accepted that there is a sexual division of labor and that women's "natural" function still encompasses motherhood. Regarding sexuality, there is a clear message as well: Women's femininity and heterosexuality must not be endangered through physical education and sport. Even if PE staff accepted the changing role of women in a changing society, there is a strong belief that the stereotype of femininity exists and that women remain less powerful, aggressive, active, strong, etc. This was explained as being either "natural" or culturally inevitable.

The second stage of the research project was a case study of four schools involving participant-observation focusing upon organization, staffing, facilities, aims, objectives and curriculum. The aim of this part of the project was to identify structures, processes and practices which reinforce or reproduce gender ideologies. Considerable consistencies across the schools were found in relation to content, aims, objectives and the emphases during physical education teaching. The contents and methods of PE remained traditional and centered on "standards" of behavior and appearance. Girls' PE was influenced highly by gender-ideology and contributed significantly to the construction and reinforcement of the gender-order. The issue of mixed versus single sex organi-