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Influenced by hermeneutics, deconstructionism, Clifford Geertz’s “thick description,” and especially Michel Foucault’s work dealing with discursive practices, scholars in several fields have turned increasingly to cultural systems, language, discourse, and “intertextuality” (the relationship between literary and cultural texts).

By the time Foucault wrote Discipline and Punish and The History of Sexuality, he had situated “bio-technico-power” as the pervasive organizing principle of Western society since the 1700s.

The extent of this thinking (which has not been without its critics) has been wide-ranging, influencing works from studies of gender to histories of the biomedical sciences. Until recently it has had limited impact upon the historical study of sport and physical education, and in this regard European scholars have taken the lead. The 1995 issue of Sport Science Review—“Concepts of the Body”—is one example of some of the more insightful work that now is being done. David Kirk’s Schooling Bodies: School Practices and Public Discourse 1880–1950 adds a new dimension.

In his introduction, Professor Kirk points out that the “repotory of knowledge of the body” that resides in departments of kinesiology (sport science, etc.) has been largely ignored. One reason is the continuing “dominance of Cartesian dualism on western systems of thought” (p. 1). Indeed, in spite of occasional protestations to the contrary, the mind/body hierarchy—and all that flows from it—has had much to do with relegating physical education, which has the double burden of being constantly confused with athletics, to the realm of inconsequential. The situation is further compromised by the fact that such departments now are dominated by those who interpret the world through such “scientific frameworks” (p. 1) as exercise physiology and biomechanics.

Acknowledging his indebtedness to Foucault’s concept of “biopower,” the author sets out to explore the social construction of children’s bodies in Australian schools between 1880 and 1950. Chapter 1 sets the contexts for events that will be explored in the rest of the book. Chapter 2 examines events in Victoria from 1865, when the Board of Education authorized Gustav Technow to train elementary school teachers in drill and gymnas-
tics, through the Defense Act of 1909 and the Melbourne Conferences of 1909 and 1910, which gave to the military responsibility for training teachers and determining the militaristic physical training that gained ascendency through World War I. As did military drill, the Swedish (Ling) gymnastic drills that soon were added required precise movements done to command. Such programs were reflective of "a technology of power" (p. 46) that emphasized regulating "children's behavior through detailed and intricate work on their bodies" (p. 45), the aim of which was to make them economically productive and politically acquiescent.

By the early 1900s, measuring bodies (anthropometry) was linked with eugenics and the production of "efficient citizens" (p. 60), and viewed as a useful tool in the quest "to improve the physical, moral, and social condition of the white race in Australia" (p. 52). Noting that no data from the aboriginal population were included in various reports, Kirk suggests (accurately, if we can extrapolate from events in the United States) that "their bodies were considered too different from white bodies to be normalized" (p. 64). Such matters are discussed in chapter 3.

Chapter 4 is concerned with the inter-war years. As men left for military service, the conduct of school physical training fell increasingly to female teachers. In the 1920s, a greater use of rhythmic activities and games for girls established the foundation for a more liberalized physical education for children of both sexes.

Once the domain of the privileged classes, by the end of World War II sport had been extended to the masses. Its broader adoption within educational institutions resulted in a shift away from what the author calls "meticulous and ponderous ... technologies of power employed to school bodies" (p. 89). However, since the ways of playing games "were strictly differentiated by femaleness and maleness" (p. 90), this tended to consolidate the prevailing gender order. In the case of working class children, team games were likely to be viewed as yet another means of civilizing bodies. These are the themes of chapter 5.

The persistence of older alongside newer ideologies is reflected in the title of chapter 6, "Liberating Bodies: National Fitness and the New Physical Education." By the mid-1930s, an interest in child-centered methods was exerting new influences on educational practices and altering professional and public discourse. However, as war clouds gathered, advocates of a national fitness campaign raised anew concerns over "the deterioration of the race." The Grey Book, published in 1946, redirected attention to "physical education built on humanistic, child-centered principles that had games and sports at its core" (p. 128). Nonetheless, drilling continued in various parts of Australia until the 1960s.

There is a great deal of thought-provoking information condensed into the mere 146 pages that comprise Schooling Bodies. To the best of my knowledge, this is the first book (at least in the English language) to assay an analysis of the development of physical training/physical education