



**THE CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER IN PHYSICAL EDUCATION**

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## ABSTRACT

Gender reform policies in Australia have recently focused on affirmative action strategies and changing the curriculum in order to improve access and opportunity for girls. This has also been the case for physical education, a subject which has traditionally required the demonstration of physical power, dominance and muscularity. This study begins by drawing on research which analyses the ways in which dominant constructions of gender are reinforced by the content, teaching and structure of physical education. It examines how students come to understand their own physicality and the ways in which physical education reinforces or challenges the way they see themselves as gendered beings. The polarisation of masculinity and femininity, homophobia and sex-based harassment are seen to be major determinants in the maintenance of sexist traditions and strategies in physical education. This raises implications for the establishment of a gender-sensitive physical education which intentionally and consciously challenges the patriarchal and ethnocentric nature of the physical education curriculum and challenges students to identify the gendered and gendering practices in sport and physical education.

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**FACULTY OF ARTS**  
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**DECLARATION**

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at any other university or tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library, being available for loan and photocopying.

Signed \_\_\_\_\_

Dated 12/12/06.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction - Throwing Like A Girl?

The girl of five does not make any use of lateral space. She does not stretch her arm sideward; she does not twist her trunk, she does not move her legs, which remain side by side. All she does in preparation for throwing is to lift her right arm forward to the horizontal and to bend the forearm backward in a pronate position... The ball is released without force, speed or accurate aim... A boy of the same age, when preparing to throw, stretches his right arm sideward and backward; supinates the forearm; twists, turns and bends his trunk; and moves his right foot backward. From this stance, he can support his throwing, almost with the full strength of his total motorium... The ball leaves the hand with considerable acceleration; it moves towards its goal in a long, flat curve. (Strauss, 1966, pp. 157-158)

Teachers of physical education<sup>1</sup> and sport have long been interested in skill analysis and the biomechanical and physiological bases for improving these skills. Many of the gender differences that occur in sport are explained in terms of biological and physiological differences; in a sense, the skills of the boy of five in the quote above, are often interpreted as superior to those of his female counterpart due to some innate ability for throwing implements, or his 'natural' strength or talent. In fact physical education, as a course of study, has been historically rooted in the biological sciences with a strong tradition in the exercise sciences, biomechanics, physiology and motor learning and development (Sparkes, 1992), a trend which is likely to continue given recent moves of physical education teacher education towards the biological or health sciences (Macdonald & Kirk, 1996). It should, therefore, be of no surprise to us that physical educators, for the most

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<sup>1</sup> The terms Physical Education and Health and Physical Education are used synonymously in this paper.

part, have traditionally utilised a research paradigm that was developed in the natural sciences (Sparkes, 1992), nor should it come as a surprise that few feminist scholars have focused their attention on gender inequality in physical education. Physical education programs therefore, have largely remained 'rooted' in patriarchal and ethnocentric discourses and fail to provide equal opportunities for girls and boys to develop and use their bodies in strong and powerful ways.

The review of the literature begins by examining the relations of power that exist within schools, the curriculum and dominant ideologies of knowledge and power. In so doing, it outlines the ways in which physical education is based on dominant ideologies of gender which are fixed and unitary. This includes an analysis of the sex/gender distinction, different theories of gender construction and the masculinity/femininity dichotomy which contribute towards the maintenance of a physical education which is restrictive, inaccessible and exclusionary for girls.

Feminist scholars argue the need for researchers to account for the importance of the lived realities of women and girls. Such an approach is considered appropriate in this study because it is the experiences of the students which provide the focus for the investigation. Semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions provide the means for gathering the data and post-structuralism provides the tools for the analysis of text.

The purpose of this thesis is to examine how students come to understand their own physicality and the ways in which physical education reinforces or challenges the way they see themselves as gendered beings. The reason for investigating the construction

of gender in physical education arose from my personal interest and position as Acting Head of Department (Physical Education). My role included timetabling, strategic planning, supervising staff and developing, implementing and evaluating curriculum offerings. Several organisational and structural problems with Sport and Human Relationships Education were discussed with staff in 1995 and major timetable restructuring at the end of that year allowed scope for the modification of programs offered. Following the National Statement and Profile in Health and Physical Education, and in collaboration with the school's Administrators, Physical Education staff, various consultative committees and the Key Learning Area Regional Coordinator (KLARC) for Physical Education, a new subject evolved within the school, called Sport, Health and Physical Education (SHAPE). The research conducted for this thesis was put to use in the development of units of work for the new subject and in the development of a unit of work for the National Professional Development Project (Gender Inclusive Curriculum) on Gender and Violence.

The construction of this thesis has been like putting together a rather complex jigsaw puzzle, with no edge pieces. It has been difficult to restrict the arms of the research octopus to something meaningful and worthwhile. It represents my attempt at putting theory into practice, combining elements of my study in the Master of Arts program with my professional work. Thus, it has been an ongoing project over the past two years. The research for this paper fuelled my work as Acting Head of Department in the construction of a new core curriculum in Physical Education and it represents the initial stages of my work as a project teacher in the National Professional Development Project (Gender Inclusive Curriculum). It offered the opportunity to discuss with students, the benefits and pitfalls of existing programs and to investigate their needs in



relation to a new core curriculum. It encouraged a discussion of gender and its relationship to Physical Education, an issue never previously discussed overtly with students or between staff at the school. Further, it is hoped that it will stimulate debate on alternative forms of physical education, not just at the present location but within the State Secondary School system in Queensland.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Literature Review - Boys Will Be Boys (and Girls Will Be Girls)?

Sport has been thoroughly identified with masculinity and has a strong symbolic value for patriarchy. It is a supremely male activity and a powerful institution through which male hegemony is constructed and reconstructed (Bryson, 1987; Dewar, 1987a). It is often promoted as the epitome of masculine superiority and it plays a fundamental role in the production and reproduction of gender inequality, misogyny, heterosexism, homophobia and sexual harassment against women (Macdonald & McKay, 1994). Yet this powerful and pervasive means of patriarchal control has received very little attention among feminist scholars (Bennett, Whitaker, Woolley Smith & Sablove, 1987; Sherlock, 1987).

Even fewer feminist scholars have focused their attention on the area of gender inequity in physical education (Dewar, 1987a). A focus on physical education (PE) is important and relevant because physical education is “traditionally one of the earliest sites of cultural reproduction of social values in sport ... especially for girls whose experience of sport may be exclusively within physical education lessons” (Sherlock, 1987, p. 444).

Since the inception of physical education as a school subject, perceived physical differences and abilities between girls and boys have formed the foundation upon which school physical education and sport programs are constructed and have proved remarkably resistant to change (Vertinsky, 1992). Judd (1993) claims that even in the

90s, physical education remains underpinned by ideologies of masculinity and femininity, is male-dominated and a negative experience for a majority of girls. Dewar (1987b) has elaborated further by noting that physical education

... is an unusual and intriguing area in which to explore constructions of gender in the curriculum because it is one of the few subjects in the curriculum that has provided patriarchal ideology with an opportunity to present itself as a biological fact rather than as a social construction. (p.269)

Physical education has thus been a stronghold of sex role stereotyping and this has resulted in differing expectations and behaviour for boys and girls (Dyer, 1986). Perpetuation of these stereotypes has largely been based on culturally and socially held beliefs about appropriate roles for each sex. Physical education programs based on these stereotypes have therefore failed to provide girls and boys with equal opportunity to develop skills, abilities and potential in all areas of physical education (Dyer, 1986). In order to understand the essence of these inequalities, it is necessary to first examine the concepts of gender and masculinity/femininity.

### Gender

If, as Talbot (1986, p. 20) asserts, "it is upon the definition of gender that the definitions of masculinity and femininity depend", it is important for the purpose of this research to attempt to establish a meaning for the terms 'gender', 'masculinity' and 'femininity', as distinct from the term, 'sex'. (I am not implying here that there is a single meaning or definition for these terms, in fact I believe that the contrary is the case. What I am trying to do in establishing a meaning, is to outline my meaning, so that the reader can begin to identify the lens through which I will be interpreting the

data collected in this research.) ‘Gender’ and ‘sex’ are often used interchangeably in everyday life, however, feminist authors (such as Allard, Cooper, Hildebrand & Wealands, 1995; Scraton, 1992; Davies, 1989; Shaw, 1993; Cockerill & Hardy, 1986; Hargreaves, 1994) point to important distinctions between the two. Scraton (1992) cites Oakley (1972) in defining ‘sex’ as the biological condition of being male or female. Allard et al. (1995) and Cockerill and Hardy (1986) see sex as biologically determined and established at birth (a view that presumably leaves transsexuals on shaky ground). Hargreaves (1994, p. 146) asserts that “... sex should properly refer to the biological aspects of male and female existence”.

However, Hall (1990, p. 224) makes the definition of sex problematic with her assertion that “biology itself provides no clear justification for a dichotomous view of sex”. For the purpose of this paper, sex is defined as the biological condition of being male or female, however it is important to bear in mind that sexual dualism or dimorphism is socially constructed in such a way that it appears to be an immutable fact. We often construct sex as a dichotomy (as in the sex test) when, in fact, science provides evidence for a biological continuum. (Hall, 1990) The example given by Hubbard (cited by Vines, 1993) can be used to further explain this point:

If a society puts half its children in dresses and skirts but warns them not to move in ways that reveal their underpants, while putting the other half in jeans and overalls and encouraging them to climb trees and play ball and other active outdoor games; if later, during adolescence, the half that has worn trousers is exhorted to “eat like a growing boy” while the half in skirts is warned to watch its weight and not get fat ... then these two groups of people will be biologically as well as socially different. Their muscles will be different, as will their reflexes, posture, arms, legs and feet, hand-eye coordination, spatial perception and so on. (pp. 93-94)

In such instances it is clear that what is understood as the biological and the sociological may become “mutually defining, intricately connected and impossible to distinguish” (Alloway, 1995b, p.11). Hall (1990) explains that the distinction between sex and gender, which was meant to “clarify the biological versus the cultural” has not worked very well. She cites Kessler and McKenna (1975): “The cultural/biological distinction traditionally associated with usage of gender versus sex is a technical one, applicable to scientists in the laboratory and some textbooks, but little else” (p. 224).

Regardless of terminology, it is clear that gendered behaviour is not simply acquired by growing up female or male (or somewhere in between). Two models have emerged in the feminist literature to explain the ‘acquisition’ of gender: sex role socialisation theory and the social construction of gender.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Biological determinism also attempts to explain how we become gendered beings. In summary, it explains differences between males (masculinity) and females (femininity) as dependent on scientific criteria. Hargreaves (1994, p. 146) explains the problems of such an association: “To regard gender as a biological category works to sustain relationships that we think we know about; biologism condones sexual stereotyping and ignores the power dimension of differences in male and female behaviour; it also underestimates the common capacities of men and women and the ways in which scientific explanations have changed historically”. That is, because it assumes that gender is assigned to males and females differently at birth, essentialist understandings ignore the multiplicity of experiences and institutions which shape our existence. Thus, biological determinism plays very little part in the feminist literature and does not feature in this paper.

## Sex role socialisation theory

Sex role theory provided the theoretical ideas that underpinned liberal feminist thought, particularly in the 1970s and early 1980s (Allard, et al., 1995). Sex role socialisation theory is generally accepted as a common sense way of theorising about gender (Davies, 1989a) and proponents claim that

...because girls are socialised differently from boys, play with different toys, dress differently, have different expectations placed upon them concerning behaviours ('that's not ladylike'), they become passive, submissive, quiet, co-operative and reticent about their own abilities and skills. Such expectations, carried through the family, school, peer group and media, work to disadvantage girls because they are unable or unwilling to compete and take up powerful positions. (Connell, 1987, pp. 33-34)

The concept of socialisation is also used in social analyses of sport. It is argued that the family is the primary agency of socialisation and it is within the family that, from infancy, boys and girls internalize particular ways of behaving which correspond to social expectations for their sex and influence their future involvement in and attitudes towards sports (Hargreaves, 1994).

According to sex role theory, difference is not innate but rather, occurs as a result of the differing social expectations imposed on men and women and thus, this theory "offers a plausible explanation for the way in which the individual establishes social relations" (Allard, et al., 1995, p. 23). The advantages of this theory then, lie within the examination of learned behaviour, for if gender is learned rather than biologically determined, then there must exist possibilities for changing the socialisation process in order to learn new and by implication, better behaviours (Allard, et al., 1995).

Although sex role theory provides a better explanation for gender than does biological determinism, many authors point to the oversimplification of the complexities of gender in role theory (see for example, Patton, 1995; Messner & Sabo, 1990; Allard, et al., 1995). Messner and Sabo (1990, p. 7) argue that to “insist on the existence of a ‘male sex role’ and a ‘female sex role’ inadvertently legitimizes and normalizes dominant forms of masculinity and femininity while marginalizing others”. Similarly, Carrigan, Connell and Lee (1987, cited by Beckett and Denborough, 1995, p. 395) indicate how theories of sex-role socialisation “deny the active negotiation of identities, relations of power and the existence of multiple femininities, masculinities and indeed sexualities”. In a sense, then, sex-role theory assumes that socialisation practices lead children to develop fixed and unchanging identities, behaviours and relationships. This of course ignores issues of agency. “[W]e as individuals and as groups, are not passively shaped by the larger societal forces such as schools or the media, but are active in selecting, adapting and rejecting the dimensions we choose to incorporate, or not, into our version of gender ” (Allard, et al., 1995, p. 24). However, complete acceptance of roles, as well as complete rejection, is actually rather rare. Indeed neither ‘acceptance’ nor ‘rejection’ accurately describes what occurs. A more accurate description is “ ... a simultaneous process of accommodation and resistance” (Anyon, 1983, cited by Davies, 1989a, p. 4). This process of accommodation and resistance is reflected in the model provided by the proponents of the social construction of gender.

### Social Construction of Gender

The concern to point out ways in which sexual differences are socially constructed has arisen because biological explanations, still prevalent and popular, are used to legitimate the different treatment of males and

females, and to justify male domination ... Constant exposure to a social world that is full of cultural signs of sexual difference makes it very difficult for children to behave so that their biological sex is not convergent with their gender. (Hargreaves, 1994, p. 149)

It is the acknowledgement of the importance of the social construction of gender, rather than emphasis on biological differences, which allows the development of critical understandings of gender and gender inequality (Scraton, 1992). This is reflected by a recent shift in emphasis in education from models of equal opportunity and gender inclusivity to critical deconstructive approaches to gender (Alloway, 1995). Use of such models, “offers a profound shift from investment in legislation and systems surveillance to the position where transformation of gender relations rests with an informed and active citizenry” (Alloway, 1995, p. 81). Such a shift is made workable when individuals come to understand how gender is constructed through everyday relations of power.

Thus, the social construction of gender recognises gender as an “organising principle, reproduced and disseminated - publicly and privately - in all social contexts; it pervades the cultural sphere” (Hargreaves, 1994, p. 150). It recognises that gender is learned by “social practice and convention, ... differs from one society to another across social classes, ethnic and cultural groups and within the same society” (Shaw, 1993, p. 9) and varies throughout history and during the lives of individuals (Scraton, 1992). Importantly, the social construction of gender model recognises that race, age, class, sex, experience, culture and institutions within society contribute to individual and collective understandings of gender but also recognises that agency (the individual’s ability to negotiate, reject, challenge and reconstruct conceptions of gender) plays an important part in gender construction and reconstruction.



Gender is constructed around versions of masculinity and femininity (Shaw, 1993) which are not inherent properties of individuals, but rather properties of our society (Davies, 1989b). Masculinity and femininity are often perceived to be innate characteristics of human beings. Babies, when they are born, have a biological sex but no 'masculine' or 'feminine' identity, but rapidly acquire one as a result of emerging into a social world where gender differences are deeply rooted in everyday life (Hargreaves, 1994). The assumption that girls have characteristics which are constant and common to them as females and which are distinctly different from the set of characteristics common to boys and men, is central to a unitary and fixed conception of gender. Therefore, because the body is the focus for the construction of gender from birth, for many people masculinity and femininity seem absolutely intimate and fundamental (Hargreaves, 1994).

The assumption that there is a 'natural' way for girls and boys to be is described by Weedon (1987) who reflects the significance of language in the labelling and reinforcing of gender specific norms of behaviour. She explains that these norms become "social facts" or "facts of life", which render invisible the relations of power from which they have been produced. Weedon (1987) goes further to explain how gendered subjectivities are composed in various ways by expectations of how one must look and behave, through definitions of pleasure which are offered as 'natural' and imply definite ways of being female and by the "absence within particular discourses of any possibility of negotiating the nature of femininity and masculinity" (p. 99).

While certain ways of being are expected of us in certain situations, there exists a spectrum of possible subject positions from which to select. "We are not forced into oppositional categories or extremes, but rather we can draw on multiple positions to generate our own constructions of femininity or masculinity" (Allard, 1995, p. 24). Likewise, Weedon (1987) argues that there are a wide range of subject positions available to us. Yet the pervasiveness of common sense assumptions of what it means to be 'a girl' or 'a boy' should not be underestimated, because these assumptions act to reinforce dominant ideologies and stereotypes commonly held in our society (Scruton, 1991). Likewise, Allard et al. (1995, p. 24) point out that "while we are active agents in the construction of gender, the options available to us are not limitless. Gender is also constructed 'collectively' within, and by, practices - including education". Therefore, it is important to remember that while we can reject or resist popular conceptions of femininity or masculinity we do so from the position of alternate definitions of gender (Weedon, 1987). Thus, a positioning contrary to 'normal' and accepted notions of femininity or masculinity can lead to a perception of oneself as a social failure and as lacking a recognisable identity within the existing social order (Davies, 1989b). For this reason, for many young adults, it is far easier to comply with expected social norms than to challenge commonly held assumptions of gender. Comer (1974, cited in Talbot, 1986) explains how a girl may refuse the constraints of femininity in her childhood by climbing trees, playing football and emulating masculine behaviour, but a boy who acts in ways considered to be 'feminine' would probably be referred for psychiatric counselling.

Likewise, Cockerill and Hardy (1986) found that pressures to conform to gender norms are particularly prominent during childhood and those who do not demonstrate their femininity in obvious ways are either seen as “immature or sexually ‘abnormal’ ” (p. 150). Thus, while various subject positions may be available to girls and boys, men and women, many of these subject positions are disregarded as ‘valid’, based on individual understandings of sexual stereotyping and expectations held collectively within a society. It is important to remember that “the extent of gender-specific assumptions, which collectively lend support to powerful dominant ideologies, have considerable impact on cultural and institutional practice” (Scruton, 1992, p. 9).

#### Male/Female Dualism at the Core of the Problem

The male/female dualism, according to Davies (1989a, p. 9) is “a fundamental conceptual device in the construction and maintenance of the social and moral order” and provides the “framework through which meaningful interpretations are made” (Davies, 1989b, p. 234). Regardless of the vast array of differences within the sexes, the differences between the sexes assume the greatest importance in Western societies. “Society requires a clear differentiation of bodies as male or female, no matter how great the blurring of difference between bodies” (Wright, in press, b). This unitary model of masculinity and femininity constructs males and females as binary opposites or complementary. This opposition is not “an opposition of equals, but one in which part of the definition of one is its dominance over the other” (Davies, 1989b, p. 234). Such a model suggests that masculinity and femininity are fixed and unchanging constructs and ignores the reality of the multiple ways of ‘doing’ masculinity and femininity. Therefore, it is more useful for the purpose of this paper to refer to

'masculinities' and 'femininities' in discussing the construction of gender in reflection of the multiple positions which are available to us.

It is the polarisation of masculinity and femininity which leads to the "exaltation of hegemonic masculinity over other groups of men, which is essential to the domination of women" (Connell, 1987, p. 85). Binary notions of masculinity and femininity also contribute to hierarchy, elitism and anxiety about sex roles (Talbot, 1986) and the construction of female as the antithesis to male (Wright, 1992). This makes an alternative construction of gender unthinkable and constrains males and females alike. Boys are obliged to view themselves as forceful and dominant and girls are seen as other to any "manifestation of masculine power" (Davies, 1989b, p. 234), making it difficult to see power as anything but inherent in masculinity.

Weedon (1987) asserts that in order to "maintain current levels of power, it is necessary to discredit or marginalize ways of giving meaning to experience which redefine hegemonic gender norms"(p. 79). The challenge then in this case, is to see a way beyond the dualism, to view behaviours as a range of negotiated responses to different contexts and dependent on discursive practices and positions, rather than as biologically determined reactions (Allard, et al., 1995).

An important way to begin to do this may come from a critical analysis of physical education positioned within the broader constructs of schooling and knowledge.

### Gender, Schooling and Knowledge

No one individual stamps another individual in the mould of the society. Instead, the society provides through its structures, its language and its interactive forms, possible ways of being, of thinking, of seeing ... and in many, though possibly not all, of these, gender is made relevant. (Davies, 1989a, p. 5)

An analysis of gender inequality in physical education must have as its foundation, an understanding of how certain types of knowledge and ways of being, thinking and seeing come to be valued in schools. This is important and relevant because school knowledge is socially constructed, and most often the people who have the greatest impact on this construction are the members of the dominant class (Kirk, 1992). Therefore, it must be remembered that school subjects are not composed of rationally agreed, static, neutral bodies of knowledge, but instead reflect the culture and ideologies of, and disproportionately advantage, the people who create and perpetuate them (Kirk, 1992). Thus, school knowledge can be seen to be constantly changing, and is shaped not merely by educational forces, but also by social, political, economic and cultural trends. Likewise, Connell (1993) reminds us that knowledge does not exist in an ethereal realm outside our society but instead, is socially constructed through various social processes by particular people with particular points of view.

It is important then to examine the relationship of these particular people and points of view to the construction of gender in schools. Scraton (1992) explains how schooling in the United Kingdom, since the 1970s has been concerned with "... the maintenance and reproduction of a sexually differentiated power system" (p. 1). Several studies have since contributed to an understanding of how schooling influences the process by which girls (and boys) emerge from their classroom with gendered identities (Spender & Sarah, 1980; Spender, 1982; Mahony, 1985; Weiner, 1985). Connell (1990) explains how schools are agents in the construction of particular forms of masculinity and femininity. Likewise, Kessler et al. (1985) cited in Martino (1995) explain how schools are characterised at any given time by a particular gender regime, including the ways in which systems of power and sexual divisions of labour are constructed within

the institution, a process which impacts on the education of both boys and girls “in terms of the regimes of learning that it sets up” (p. 359). However it is important to remember that schools are but one factor among many in the construction of gender. There is not one single cause of the ways girls and boys come to know themselves as gendered beings. Girls and boys, as well as their teachers and mothers and fathers (and friends and the media and significant others) are formed in interweaving ‘discourses’ or patterns of cultural meaning. Therefore, “it is not just ideals or stereotypes which young people may try to copy but systems of meaning built into the language itself” (Yates, 1993, p. 601). That is, as discussed previously, girls and boys are not passive recipients in the construction of gender but rather are active agents in constructing, reconstructing, accepting and rejecting various notions of gender. So, while in many cases, the organisational culture, classroom management and teaching strategies of schools are responsible for polarising girls and boys and reinforcing their ideas about gender divisions, schools also have the potential to alter children’s perceptions of gender roles, to challenge sexist behaviour and to challenge students to find alternative and multiple ways of being masculine or feminine (Hargreaves, 1994, p. 157).

### Gender and Physical Education

Schools are important institutions which serve to reinforce male-female power relations and it is important to recognise physical education as an aspect of schooling which contributes to this process in terms of “its relationship to a sexual division of leisure in society and the reinforcement of patriarchal power relations” (Scruton, 1992, p. 18). This is due not only to the emphasis of physical education on “male-oriented team sports and ... competitive ethos” (Vertinsky, 1992, p. 386), but also to the

hegemonic ideologies within the hidden curriculum; ideologies that are transmitted through the content, organisation and teaching practices of physical education classes. Gendered identities are embodied in specific social and historical contexts, that have traditionally privileged and valued certain masculinities over other ways of being. Physical education, like sport, has played an important role in this, by way of naturalising norms of male strength and female weakness and legitimating physical domination and aggression in practices which “initiate young males into a hierarchy of gendered identities in which the capacity to dominate is honoured and physical power confers social power” (Whitson, 1994, p. 367). Scraton (1986a, p. 88) asserts that in physical education “... dominant ideologies and their associated common-sense assumptions of women’s physical ability/capacity, motherhood/domesticity and sexuality remain intact”, images which place limitations on the performance and involvement of girls. Ideologies of physicality and the politics of sexuality play an important part in reinforcing dominant notions of masculinity, femininity and sexuality in physical education (Scraton, 1992) and form an important basis for this study.

#### Physical Education and Physicality

Since the work of Foucault (1979 and 1981) on the power/body/knowledge relationship, an explanation of the gendered nature of this relationship has formed an important basis for understanding the construction of feminine body (see for example Bartky, 1988; Bordo, 1988, 1991). Whitson (1994) has described how childhoods are structured by “discourses of femininity and masculinity and by gendered practices of play that teach us to inhabit and experience our bodies in profoundly different ways” (p. 353). Hence, from a young age, boys and girls come to experience their bodies

differently. Boys learn to use their bodies in skilled forceful ways, developing “force (through leverage, co-ordination and follow-through)” and transmitting “power through their limbs or through extensions like ball bats and golf clubs” (Whitson, 1994, p. 353). This puts men and boys at a distinct advantage in sports and physical education, given the dominant associations between masculinity, physical activity and power evident in the current Queensland health and physical education curricula (Kirk & Wright, 1995).

In contrast, Young (1980) describes the movement of girls, which is characterised by partiality (Whitson, 1994) and constrained and lacking in power (Kirk & Wright, 1995):

Not only is there a typical style of throwing like a girl, but there is a more or less typical style of running like a girl, climbing like a girl, swinging like a girl, hitting like a girl. They have in common, first that the whole body is not put into fluid and direct motion but rather, in swinging and hitting, for example, the motion is concentrated in one body part; and second, that the woman’s motion tends not to reach, extend, lean, stretch and follow through in the direction of her intention. (Young, 1980, p. 143)

Following the work of de Beauvoir, Young (1980) argues that these movement patterns have derived from discourses and practices which position women as objects for male scrutiny. “Developing a sense of our bodies as beautiful objects to be gazed at and decorated requires suppressing a sense of our bodies as strong, active subjects, moving out to meet the world’s risks and confront the resistances of matter and motion” (Young, 1980, cited in Kirk & Wright, 1995, p. 330). In other words, women in patriarchal culture are defined as other or object (body-object), which is at odds with sport and physical activity, which is “the paragon of body subject” (Hall, 1990, p. 223) Whitson (1994) succinctly describes the differences between females



and males in this regard. Men, by experiencing themselves in active, forceful ways, have learned “to act, instead of being looked at and acted upon” (Whitson, 1994, p. 355). This means that during adolescence, while boys are judged by achievement with respect to masculinity, girls’ physicality is judged against the boys (hence woman as ‘other’ or complementary to man) (Scraton, 1992, Wright, in press, b).

The implications of the construction of gendered subjectivity are significant with respect to the role played by physical education in the secondary school curriculum. Kirk and Wright (1995) emphasise the importance of examining the embodiment of students in curriculum and pedagogical practices in order to change the way girls and boys experience and use their bodies and so, to change the way they function in society. By problematising sport, physical education and physical activity, the construction of male and female bodies can become the subject of investigation, curriculum reform and strategies to change pedagogic practice within the context of schooling (Kirk & Wright, 1995).

### The Politics of Sexuality

In a culture where woman is defined as body-object and sport and physical activity as body-subject, there is an obvious incompatibility between women and sport. “This means either that women have been excluded from the symbols, practices and institutions of sport, or when they do participate, what they do is not considered true sport, nor in some cases are they viewed as real women” (Hall, 1990, p. 223). Women in sport and physical education who demonstrate physical power and muscularity, that is, non-conventional femininity, are at risk of being treated in a derogatory way (Hargreaves, 1994) and have to prove their (hetero)sexuality (Lenskyj, 1986; Griffin,

1992). In a society where desirable female sexuality is presented as a “passive, responsible heterosexuality”, the demonstration of power and assertion of women in contact sports “raises doubts about the status of their sexuality” (Scraton, 1992, p. 57). Indeed the power of homophobia to control and intimidate both women and men should not be underestimated.

### Physical Education, Physicality and Sexuality - the dilemma

Sport, activity and physical education can be empowering. Physical education, more than any other subject in the curriculum offers girls the opportunity to experience themselves as powerful, skilful performers and to be “vigorous, vibrant and to develop good health” (Scraton, 1992, p. 103). Yet physical education for many girls has a negative connotation and fails them in terms of providing the opportunity to develop a positive female physicality. Conventional conceptions of femininity, are antithetical to the kind of images which girls normally associate with involvement in sport; “images of muscle sweat and showers” (Evans, 1984, p. 13). The messages that girls get about femininity from family, peers, media and popular culture (teen magazines, music and romance genres) and from their experience, work to position physical education as incompatible with their expectations of future leisure and lifestyle (Scraton, 1992). However, while physical education does not provide ‘meaningful experiences’ for many adolescent women (Scraton, 1992), it is important to remember that “there are girls who are successful in physical education, who like the subject and support even its conventional forms of organisation, yet we know very little of these or of the basis and persistence of their commitment” (Evans, 1984, p. 14).

## Summary

The literature reviewed in this chapter has examined the relations of power that exist within schools, the curriculum and dominant ideologies of knowledge and gender. It points to the positioning of Physical Education as a subject within the secondary school curriculum which has the potential for providing students with liberating experiences and yet, at the same time, serves to legitimate and reinforce dominant stereotypes and gender expectations. While students are encouraged and have the opportunity to develop a positive physicality, dominant social discourses often seem antithetical to such a development. Certainly for girls, the possibilities for experiencing themselves as strong and powerful performers are limited by the social and ideological expectations associated with dominant cultures of femininity. Despite this, there is evidence that some girls are highly successful and enjoy physical education, apparently coming to terms with the expectations of them to maintain a 'desirable' femininity, while at the same time, being active in a variety of ways. Thus, while gender relations in physical education permeate the structure and culture of the subject, its organisation and curriculum, they are also part of the process of negotiation, struggle and change. This study is an attempt to identify and clarify the role of physical education students (particularly girls) in this process.

## CHAPTER 3

### Methodology

The epistemological assumptions held by a researcher give rise to particular methodological implications for the choices made during the research process, in relation to data collection, interpretation of the findings and the ways they are eventually written about (Sparkes, 1992). For this reason it is necessary in this chapter to outline both the methods employed in collecting and analysing the research material and the theoretical framework underpinning this process.

### The Framework

The methods employed in research are not simply technical skills that exist independently of the purpose of the research and the historical, social and cultural background of the researcher. The theoretical position taken reflects the researcher's values, beliefs and dispositions towards the social world (Sparkes, 1992). Therefore, the method selected is not determined by the problem but rather by the philosophical and political position of the researcher and the context of the intellectual, emotional and personal commitment to the issue (Scruton & Flintoff, 1992). Indeed, it is my commitment to feminism and to physical education which shaped the manner in which the problem was formulated, the context of this investigation and the nature in which it has proceeded.

Historically, much of the research in physical education has been quantitative in nature, with its reliance on scientific method, statistical analyses of data, and 'inherent

objectivity'. Such an approach, however, fails to consider the subjective and multiple realities of the students who are the focus of this investigation. Hence the framework for this study needed to take into account my desire to explore the subjective experiences of these students in physical education and to provide a means for interpreting these experiences. Weedon (1987, p. 8) explains that a theoretical perspective is politically useful to feminists if it is able to "recognise the importance of the *subjective* in constituting the meaning of women's lived reality" because the ways and means by which people make sense of their lives provides a necessary starting point for understanding how power relations structure society.

The purpose of this study, was to explore with students their understandings of gender and its relationship to their physical education experiences. Clearly, in this study, it was essential to hear the voices, thoughts and ideas of the participants, in their own words. Therefore, a qualitative method was implemented through the use of semi-structured interviews. The principal advantage of this approach was that it allowed an exploration of the diversity and complexity of students' experiences, while also allowing an examination of their similarities. Interviews with participants were tape recorded because of the difficulties in observing and analysing verbal interaction as it occurs. These audio tapes were then transcribed and the transcriptions used as 'text' for analysis. The term 'text' is used here following Tinning (1991), who defined 'text' as a "particular concrete manifestation of practices organised within particular discourses" (p. 3). That is, the transcriptions were viewed as text which allows for multiple readings or interpretations, depending on the history, values and ideological dispositions of the reader (Tinning, 1991). My reading of the text will necessarily be different to that of another reader and it is important to remember, as Tinning (1991)

argues, that some readings are more likely than others because certain sets of discourses are more powerful or dominant than others.

While the primary focus was on the lived experiences of the participants, I felt it necessary to also add my voice and interpretation to the process. I am not suggesting by this that the participants in this study suffered from 'false consciousness', rather I believe that debunking 'commonsense' assumptions is essential to the process of challenging hegemonic ideologies. Foucault (1977) explains that "the problem is not one of changing people's 'consciousness' or what's in their heads; but the political, economic, institutional regime of the production of truth" (p. 14). Likewise, Scraton and Flintoff (1992, p. 176) explain that research cannot merely be descriptions of the lives of participants, given by themselves, "... what is important ... is the analysis of these accounts within the wider context of economic, social and political dimensions". The dilemma I have attempted to grapple with is how to produce an analysis which grants participants their subjectivity but goes beyond their experience or what Ramazanoglu (1989, cited in Scraton & Flintoff, 1992, p. 176) has called "the problem of transcending women's expression of their experiences". My approach to the analysis of the text provided by my interaction with the participants, is, in part, a reflection of this.

Underpinning my analysis of the text are elements I have 'borrowed' from post-structural theory. I have tried to bear in mind the fact that the experiences of individuals are not homogeneous but are determined by access to existing discourses or systems of meaning and dependent on our ways of interpreting the world. The range and social power of existing discourses, our access to them and the political strengths

of the interests which they represent, determine how we live our lives as conscious thinking subjects and how we give meaning to the material social relations under which we live and which structure our everyday lives (Weedon, 1987, p. 26). Thus, as individuals, we are not products of a process of social construction but are constituted and reconstituted through the various discursive practices in which we are involved (Davies, 1989b). “The experience of being a person is captured in the notion of subjectivity” (Davies, 1991, p. 3) and any one time, we may be constituted through multiple discourses, therefore, an individual’s subjectivity is multiple and contradictory. We are thus multiple rather than unitary beings, dependent on the discourses we have access to and the subject positions made available within them. A post-structural approach to the examination of text, in this case enables the analysis of accommodation and resistance to dominant discourses of masculinity and femininity.

### The Context

The school in which this study was undertaken, is located in Ipswich, a burgeoning city thirty five minutes drive from Brisbane, Queensland. The school is a government funded co-educational school (fifty one percent of students are girls) with a student population of over 1350, making it one of the largest state secondary schools in the Ipswich District. Ipswich is a residential and retail-industrial community with a relatively high proportion of people from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Many single parent families make up the school community and a number of different cultural groups are represented, including Samoans, Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, however, white Anglo-Saxon families predominate. The school caters to a diverse

population with varying academic and vocational needs and curriculum offerings reflect these needs. Students are strongly influenced by existing economic conditions and as a result of poor job prospects in the area, most students remain at school through the post-compulsory years.

Currently, all year eight students study physical education for three lessons per week. Students in years nine and ten must study five core subjects and three electives, of which physical education is one. In years eleven and twelve (post-compulsory schooling), students may elect to study physical education, which is predominantly aimed at students intending to pursue further study or recreational education, a subject designed to investigate recreational opportunities within the local community and promote lifelong participation.

### The Purpose of the Study

This study began with my concern for the apparently high attrition rate of girls in the junior physical education classes at 'Briar' State High School and the effect of the school, curriculum and social environment on the experiences of girls in these classes. Thus, it was conceived within a liberal feminist framework which sought to make educational experiences more equitable for girls. However, as Wright (in press, a) explains, an equity approach generally fails to critique assumptions about the homogeneity of girls' experiences, nor does it critique the way in which physical education is implicated in the production and reproduction of dominant discourses of gender which disempower and fragment the experiences of girls. Further to this, it is



necessary to question the value of practices which are 'more equitable', when a fairer share of opportunities and resources is often framed in relation to the masculine sporting tradition of sport and physical education, "without questioning the assumptions on which the practices of this tradition are based; nor questioning the contribution these practices themselves make to girls' disaffection with physical education" (Wright, in press, b).

This investigation arose from my perception that physical education lessons at 'Briar' State High School were, for many girls, alienating experiences. In junior classes, (years nine and ten) boys outnumbered the girls by two to one. The focus of the set curriculum was on competitive team sports, with a traditionally male bias and included cricket, basketball, touch football, soccer, and athletics, where the focus was on performance outcomes in activities where male-defined standards of power, domination and strength pre-dominate. This is further exemplified by the fact that assessment in the gymnastics unit required performance of various skills, rather than requiring students to be creative in designing routines or performances. The dance unit combined a mixture of social and ballroom dance, for example, Gypsy Tap, Pride of Erin, Madison, Jive and Cha Cha, but was often not studied because of the high ratio of boys to girls. (Several staff members felt that it would be acceptable for girls to dance with other girls if the ratio of sexes was reversed, however, they did not deem it appropriate for the boys to dance with other boys.) There was little, if any, flexibility in programming. I was concerned that many girls' experiences in physical education were negative and based around the 'accommodation' of the dominant, masculinist views (and behaviours) of boys in their classes. Girls and their experiences, it seemed

were peripheral, trivialised and often even invisible. I was interested to determine whether these feelings were in fact experienced by female physical education students.

Previous authors (see for example, Scraton & Flintoff, 1992; Wright, 1992; Macdonald & McKay, 1994) have examined the ways in which images of femininity are reinforced or challenged by the structure, content and teaching of physical education to girls in secondary schools, however, I was more interested in how girls come to understand their own physicality and their understanding of the ways in which physical education reinforces or challenges the way they see themselves as gendered beings. I was particularly interested to find out how they support each other and create strategies to cope with marginalisation and being silenced. This follows from Evans (1984, p. 14) who explains that the way in which we, as researchers, define the 'problem' of girls and physical education, relates to how "willing and able we are to appreciate and understand their (the girls') actions and to assume that their perspectives are both worth exploring and knowing". To ignore the sophistication of the perspectives of students, Evans (1984, p. 15) argues, is likely to "generate an account and analysis of the problem which may be both partial and potentially misleading".

I believe that while the primary focus of my research was on the experiences of girls, it was also necessary to seek out opinions and experiences from some of the boys. Scraton and Flintoff (1992) explain that this is vital if we are to broaden our understanding of the contribution made by physical education to the reinforcement of dominant ideologies of masculinities and the role played by men in gender power

relations. To address the needs of girls in isolation from the needs of boys is fraught with problems, particularly in a co-educational setting.

It is apparent that the amount of effort that has gone into girls' education is being undermined by a lack of change in the predominantly male school-culture. Thus, there is a need to acknowledge and address the impact on boys and girls of a culture and a schooling process which actively promotes gender divisions and impoverishes the educational experiences of both girls and boys. (Queensland University of Technology, 1994, p. 3)

My primary goal was then to use the information shared by the students to introduce changes into the curriculum, which would incorporate principles of equity and social justice and make the teaching of the social construction of gender an overt operation in physical education. I believe, with Kirk and Wright (1995) that physical education offers enormous opportunities to demonstrate, evaluate and challenge the ways in which masculinities and femininities are constructed through bodily practices.

### The Process

Prior to the commencement of this project, approval was sought from the school Principal and the Ethics Committee of the Department of Women's Studies at the University of Adelaide to conduct the research. Participant information letters and consent forms were designed in order to outline the nature of the research and the expectations of participants and the researcher. These are included in Appendices A and B respectively.

In the initial stages of this research, six year nine students (fourteen years of age) were invited to attend a focus group discussion, in part to assist in clarifying the issues

relevant to them with regard to the gendered nature of their experiences in physical education. The students were selected from three separate year nine physical education classes and were all students whom I had had previous contact with in either my role as Acting Head of Department or Year Coordinator. I selected students I knew well and who I knew to be willing contributors to dialogue relating to their personal experiences in physical education. They were all active students who enjoyed physical education, physical activity and sport. They were supplied with lunch and we 'chatted' about a range of topics for forty minutes. This approach enabled students to explore their own experiences, to express their views on emerging issues within physical education and to make a contribution to the development of the new SHAPE program. I discussed my aims in conducting the research and invited the students to be participants in the study.

I then discussed my research aims with all students in four year nine physical education classes and asked for volunteers to assist in the study. I promoted this as an opportunity for the students to help shape the direction of the new subject, to evaluate existing subjects and explained that an interview would form the basis of their involvement. Because students were asked to give up a lunch hour, I offered to provide lunch. I also explained what I hoped to achieve through conducting the research: the chance to gain some valuable insights into what students found interesting and relevant in physical education; what they would change; and how they perceived the relationship between gender and physical education. Interested students were then invited to take home an information sheet outlining the research aims in further detail and a participant consent letter to be signed by both parents and participants. Of the forty five letters distributed, nine were completed by students and

parents who consented to their involvement. Only one of the students was a member of my initial focus group.

All students agreed to have their interviews tape recorded. I assured them that no identifying information would be used and that all tapes would be destroyed once I had taken notes from them. I transcribed all of the interview data personally, so that no other person heard the discussions that took place and any names of teachers or students that came up in discussions were changed so that confidentiality was maintained. I had a list of key questions that I wished to address but many other issues were discussed dependent on student responses and experiences. This method of semi-formal interviewing allowed me to pursue topics that arose that were relevant to this project but which I had not previously considered. It also allowed scope to pursue areas of student interest or areas of personal interest. Simons (1977 cited in Judd, 1993, p. 49) explains how this encourages interaction as it “helps to break down the formality of the interview over which the interviewer is perceived to have control”.

### My Personal Background

... Providing an overview is, today, a suspect enterprise.... Second, though I have attempted to give a ‘general’ picture, my story is inevitably shaped by my own background ... and my own interests... (Yates, 1993, p. 2).

It is impossible to divorce the telling of a story from the history of the story teller. Yates (1993, p. 2) explains how the organisation of text and method for telling the story is “a ‘claim to truth’, an assertion of a ‘master narrative’”, which will inevitably be shaped by the background and interests of the story-teller. For this reason some of

my background is discussed here so that the reader can see something of the lens through which I have viewed this work.

I am a first generation Australian whose cultural and ethnic ties are limited by the scars of my parents, who moved to Australia as refugees from a war torn country. My mother left school in year ten and my father completed six years of primary education in Yugoslavia. A lifetime of working in low security, low paid jobs meant a desire for their children to succeed academically and a strong work ethic was instilled.

My interest in sport and physical education began in primary school and was maintained throughout my schooling with the support of my parents (and Mum's 'taxi'). I was heavily involved in several sports (considered by my parents to be appropriate for girls) during my school days and I gained a great degree of success and satisfaction from my involvement. I did not understand the problems faced by many of my female friends in our co-educational physical education classes and certainly could not understand why many of them dropped out of sport or physical education.

My interest in sport developed into a career at university, where I undertook study in the field of Human Movement Studies. A course in sociology opened my eyes to inequality and my interest in equity issues, particular in relation to gender, expanded as a result. Gender equity became my passion as I constantly searched for ways to incorporate it into my teaching and learning. The focus on sport and health and physical education has been the common thread in my post graduate studies in the area of Women's Studies, just as the focus on gender was the common thread in my undergraduate work in Human Movement Studies. It has been the marriage of the two that has sustained my interest in teaching health and physical education to adolescents,

which I have been doing in Queensland State Secondary Schools for the past six years. The outcomes that have resulted from encouraging students to examine and critically evaluate dominant constructions of gender have influenced my growth as a teacher and as a professional. My ultimate aim as an educator is to see students gain the skills to recognise, challenge and question assumptions that are taken for granted and to see them develop the confidence to investigate and explore alternatives.

As a teacher conscious of equity issues, I found it frustrating dealing with and teaching within an 'imposed' curriculum, determined by historical influences. Soon after arriving at 'Briar' State High School, I made suggestions to address the gender imbalance within the curriculum but these were always met with resistance and negativity. It was with a great deal of enthusiasm I embraced the role of Acting Head of Department and with it, the scope for curriculum development and change.

### The Students

The students who participated in this study came from backgrounds as varied as their experiences, although there was not a mix of racial and/or ethnic backgrounds. The students who agreed to be interviewed were asked for some brief biographical details and were given the opportunity to describe themselves. I have also added some of my own personal comments to theirs. Two students did not complete their involvement in the project. Sharon left school just prior to her scheduled interview and an extended illness prevented Lara from being able to attend an interview. The names of students have been changed in accordance with our agreement prior to interview.

### Annette

Annette is a confident, well - built student who is above average height for her age. She is vocal and dominant but can be shy at times. She has a sharp wit and describes herself as someone who can take and tell jokes. Both her parents are unemployed and her father is currently awaiting an aortic valve operation. Annette enjoys many sports including netball, volleyball, cricket, canoeing and football but persistent muscular and joint problems currently prevent her from being involved in sport to the degree to which she would like. In addition to sport, Annette enjoys watching television, knitting, crocheting and playing with her dog in her leisure time. When asked about her dislikes, her reply consisted of “guys harassment of females”.

### Cheryl

Cheryl is an outspoken, outgoing, bubbly and enthusiastic student. She describes herself as fun and willing to have a go at anything. She lives with her mum (a crossing supervisor) and step-father (a sales person), an older brother and sister and a younger half-brother. She also has a half-sister who she never sees, a younger step-brother and sister and two older step-brothers whom she has never met. Cheryl likes boys, chocolate and playing hockey, netball and football. Her dislikes include racism and girls not eating.

### Rachel

Rachel comes from a sporting family. Her mum was a talented athlete in her younger years and her dad is a golf professional. Sport is Rachel's passion. She is a dedicated and talented sportsperson who is no stranger to hard work. She participates in some



sport or physical activity every day. Her main interests include golf, soccer and athletics. Her younger sister is also talented in these areas. Rachel is a reserved, polite and intelligent student who is quick to smile. She describes herself as someone who is helpful and willing to try different things.

### Chris

Chris is a likeable, friendly student who is honest and reliable. He describes himself as “sporty, ‘bad’ and careful” and having a good sense of humour. His dislikes include politicians, dancing and his family, whom he finds “annoying at times”. His mother is a teacher and his father is a primary school principal and he has an older brother and a younger sister. Chris works part time at Pizza Hut. He likes computers and spends much of his leisure time training for and taking part in hockey and athletics competitions.

### Denise

Denise is the youngest in a family of four, having three older brothers. Her father is a mechanic and her mother works at Woolworths. Denise is a vivacious person who has a contagious laugh. She is outgoing but can be sensitive and fragile at times. She describes herself as weird, sometimes silly, but a nice person with whom to talk. Her likes include hockey, dancing, looking at clothes, watching soap operas and reading and her dislikes include “people who criticise others and brothers”.

### Tony

Tony likes video games, take out food and sport, particularly basketball, tennis and archery. He found it difficult to describe his good qualities but eventually settled on “

a good friend and can talk to people”. Tony is quite shy and reserved with new or unfamiliar people and is a valued class member. School features in his list of dislikes as do “parents who don’t let you do things”. Tony’s mother is a housewife and his dad has a job in sales.

### **Summary**

This chapter has outlined the research methodology underpinning this investigation. A break from the traditional modes of research in physical education was considered to be most appropriate in this case as the subjective experiences of the students were the primary focus. Therefore a qualitative approach was used through the utilisation of semi-structured interviews and a post-structural approach will be applied in the analysis of the text in chapter four.

## CHAPTER 4

### Findings And Discussion

[C]ontemporary physical education teaching remains underpinned by a tradition and an ethos informed by sexist strategies...(It) continues to reinforce gender differences both overtly, in the activities offered and covertly, through the attitudes and reactions of those involved in the policy and practice of physical education teaching (Scraton, 1986a, p. 88).

The objective of this chapter is to explore the extent to which some students recognise, understand and/or interpret these gender differences.

#### Student perceptions of sex , gender and sexuality

Evans (et al., 1987 cited in Vertinsky, 1992, p. 381) point out that students come to physical education socialised into particular ways of seeing and doing physical activities, with ideas already formulated in relation to what is appropriate for their respective gender. Years of practice and socialisation have differently predisposed students with the skills and abilities necessary for a competent performance in particular activities. Thus, it was interesting to discuss with students their ideas about gender, sex, sexuality and behaviour.

Student perceptions of gender were at times contradictory, however the overriding theme from all of the interviews was the notion of a binary understanding of gender, with femininity being opposite or antithetical and complementary to masculinity. This presents a problem in physical education where characteristics commonly associated

with dominant constructions of masculinity, such as toughness, aggressiveness and competitiveness are valued more highly than characteristics commonly associated with dominant constructions of femininity. Such a polarisation results in the construction of female incompetence and male superiority (Wright, 1992), particularly when the focus for the curriculum is on competitive, 'traditionally male' team sports, as is the case at 'Briar' State High School.

The girls in this study seemed to have a clear idea about what it meant to be masculine or feminine in their physical education class and seemed more willing than the boys to articulate their understandings. It was difficult to determine why the boys had difficulty in this but it may well have been that the boys felt uneasy about labelling or stereotyping females in a negative way. The girls, however, did not hesitate to describe the polarised differences between the skilled, active girls (usually themselves) and the girls they saw as "more feminine" and less active. For Cheryl, being feminine meant an association with weakness and passivity:

S: How would you describe the behaviour of the girls you call more feminine?

C: ... they're just nice girls.

S: What do you mean by that?

C: They're skirts. They're weak. Don't stand up for themselves. They're not active, not really talented at sports. They're better at their school work than the boys and they're not as friendly with the boys as we are.

Likewise, Rachel's description focussed on her perception of "feminine girls" as less active and physically talented:

S: So being feminine means?

R: Like not active and scared of the ball sort of thing and (laugh) like scream when it comes (gives a demonstration)

S: (Laugh)

R: (Laugh) They do! (Laugh) I can't believe that!

These girls recognised their own high level of skill in sport and physical education and did not attribute the descriptions of weakness and passivity to their own sporting performance. However, it was still important to them to identify with the characteristics commonly associated with femininity, which, for Cheryl, was inextricably linked to the biological fact that she is a girl.

C: Well I reckon it all depends on how you were brought up and how your friends treat you.

S: Yeah, and probably what you read and watch on TV and see other people doing. Like if you read Dolly you probably get a different message about what it means to be feminine than someone who doesn't. Like do you consider yourself feminine?

C: Yeah! (indignantly) I'm a girl.

S: Yeah.

### Gender and Behaviour

It was interesting to note that several students made a link to behaviour in their analysis of gender. Denise included "constantly in trouble" as one of her descriptors of masculinity, in addition to having "muscles in legs and arms" and "being the class clown". According to her, femininity meant being more studious and "serious" or "not clowning around". Annette also tied her perceptions of masculinity and femininity to behaviour, which, for her, is apparently biologically determined.

A: Well boys are rough and tough and it's like they have to be in trouble all the time to look 'cool' in front of their mates. Even when they get a lot of warnings and get sent out ... it's a big joke. Like Ha! Ha! I got sent out. It's like a competition to see who goes next.

S: Is it the same for the girls?

A: No, the girls are more interested in doing well, especially in theory. The guys just think it's a bludge subject.  
S: So they don't take it seriously?  
A: Oh, for prac they do, but in theory (classes), they just want to muck around.

Tony also took a deterministic view of behaviour. Boys, he thought, tended to misbehave to "look tough in front of their mates" but for girls, it was "more important to do well".

Generally, students seemed unable or unwilling to distinguish between sex and gender, although most believed that there were a range of behaviours available (and acceptable) for girls. Cheryl, for example, talked of how she behaved in different ways depending on the type of group and the expectations of that group, hence outlining her understanding of multiple subjectivities which are not fixed or unitary, but dependent upon the available discourses.

C: But I mean I could be just as rough as the boys if I wanted to and I know when to act 'girlie' and when to act 'boyish'.  
S: So you think there are times when different behaviour is acceptable?  
C: Yeah, like when I'm with friends, with the boys, be tough and when you go out with the fam [family] you like sort of have to be really petite and dress really nicely and not chew with your mouth full and behave politely. With the boys you can just muck around and swear and stuff.  
S: (laugh) C! (mock horror) Surely not!  
C: (laugh) Yes. You are seeing my feminine side now actually.

Several of the students described how they believed it was easier for girls to be involved in a range of sports and activities and to display a variety of behaviours, than it was for boys.

R: Yeah, even in primary school for us, we kept pushing to play soccer and cricket and football; all that stuff the girls get to play now. Yeah

it's being more accepted for girls to play those kinds of things but boys going into dance and stuff, it's still not the done thing to do.

Hargreaves (1994) also points to the fact that images of femininity in physical education are diversifying more quickly than images of masculinity. The trend for girls to participate in sports like football, soccer, cricket and other sports with a strong male ethos and tradition, is expanding, but there does not appear to be equivalent research on the acceptance of 'feminine-appropriate' sports among boys. The idea that girls and boys should benefit from experiences in physical education has tended to reflect the notion that girls should emulate boys in physical education rather than the other way around (Hargreaves, 1994).

Johnson (1990, p. 22), in a study on girls in mathematics, reminds us that "girls do not occupy a feminine, subordinate position in some once-and-for-all way, embedded in their social role by a unified and fixed sense of their self and its relationship to the world". So too it seems that the girls in this study were cognisant of the multiple ways of being which were available to them. However these are not limitless and this acceptance of activities and behaviours clearly did not extend to boys. Indeed, the boys responded indignantly at any suggestions of 'feminine' behaviour.

This tolerance level was also not extended to girls whose skill level exceeded that of the boys. Annette, Cheryl and Chris, for example, explained how when the class is playing a particular sport, "usually the boys are better at the sport than the girls", but the boys tend not to be very accepting of girls who outperform them and are far less tolerant of sports considered 'feminine' than girls are of sports considered 'masculine'.

S: But what happens if some of the girls are better than some of the boys?

A: They (the boys) don't like it. They usually get more aggressive.

S: Oh! How do the girls react?

A: They try to fit in as best as possible.

S: So if you can't match it with the boys?

A: You just drop out.

S: So how do you think the guys would react if we said we're not doing basketball now, we are doing netball instead?

C: They wouldn't like it because they know the girls would be better at it and they wouldn't like being beaten. Some guys really worry about that.

S: You've already said that most people don't seem to enjoy cricket, how do you think the other boys would react if we incorporated more sort of traditionally female sports into health and physical education?

C: Oh, they'd probably change the rules a bit.

S: Like make it tackle netball or something?

C: Yeah.

S: What would they say if we went out there now and said, "We're not doing cricket any more, we've changed to netball"?

C: (Laugh) They'd say "Oh No! We like cricket now!"

Rachel, like all of the students interviewed, described herself as an active participant in physical education classes and someone who enjoyed all sports, so it was interesting to listen to her perception of the difference between male and female attitudes to physical education and physical activity.

R: Boys like to participate in sports. They love physical education. They're ... um ... active a lot.

S: What about the girls?

R: No where near as many girls would participate in sport (pause)

S: Are they more likely to be watchers rather than doers? Like go and watch the footy rather than play something themselves?

R: Yeah.

S: Why do you think that is?

R: (Laugh) I don't know. Sport just isn't as important to girls, you know?

S: Well what is it about sport that is important to boys?

R: If they're good at a sport, um, like we are doing touch football now, well they get like classed as 'good at football'.

S: So recognition is important?



R: Yeah and um, enjoyment, I suppose, but mainly the recognition, I think.

S: So you think that girls don't get that from sport?

R: The girls that want to get that from it would but other girls, um, think that if they're not good at it, they don't try it sort of thing. It's just not important to some girls.

S: So what is important?

R: Oh, shopping, going out with friends, that sort of thing.

Hargreaves (1994) cites the study by Cockerill and Hardy (1987) on girls attitudes to physical education and ideas about femininity. The students in their study revealed the pressure they felt to conform to dominant expectations of femininity and their feelings that participation in vigorous sports was unfeminine.

Because being good at sports is inextricably linked to popular perceptions of masculinity, for secondary schoolboys success brings prestige and boosts self-image. But sports are far less important in the lives of adolescent girls, who, encouraged by peer group pressure, seek other activities linked closely to their preferred perceptions of femininity... (Hargreaves, 1994, p. 155).

Interestingly, for the students in this study, the opportunities for success, recognition and prestige at the school sport level were considered equal for boys and girls but as something to which boys aspire more than girls.

#### Heterosexuality as a differentiating principle

Martino (1995) describes the social regulation of boys' behaviour in terms of "policing masculinity". He outlines how boys feel the need to compete with one another in peer group networks in order to assert their masculinity. Boys who fall short of dominant expectations of masculine behaviour are labelled and teased and in this way, hegemonic heterosexual versions of masculinity are asserted and homophobic

boundaries are established in order to police masculinity. Hargreaves (1994, p. 171) explains that this situation is not likely to change while gender division and heterosexuality are the organising principles permeating society and while boys are taught, through sports, to accept an aggressive model of masculinity that “embodies compulsory heterosexuality, the subordination of women and the marginalisation of gay men”. It will remain difficult for boys and men to choose behaviours they have been taught associate with the feminine gender role, while homophobic name-calling appears as an endemic feature of school playgrounds (Griffin & Genasci, 1990).

Two of the students in this study seemed to identify homophobia as a limiting factor for some of the students in their physical education classes, but were not able to explain why the situation was different for boys than for girls.

S: Are there any girls in your class who get teased because they don't fit the stereotype of what girls should be like?

R: Yeah like \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_. Like they're really sporty and um, they're not as 'girlie' as some of the others and don't like, um, girl things. (Laugh)

S: (Laugh) How do you mean?

R: Things girls like, like magazines and hairdo's and clothes and that sort of stuff. They probably just rather run around with the guys like with a football or stuff and yeah.

S: So they get teased for that?

R: Well not really, no. Like if you're always playing sport with the boys, they don't put you down much. So long as you just try and don't be like 'girlie' and don't want to join in.

Clearly in this case, alternate femininities were accepted by other students particularly if this had a relationship to the successful outcome of the game. Unfortunately, the same range of acceptable ways of being was not extended to the boys in physical education classes. Research has shown that boys seem to suffer greater anxiety over

sex identity than girls and have fewer opportunities, without suffering stigma, to express themselves in ways which are different from conventional norms of masculinity, particularly in their younger years (Hargreaves, 1994, p. 148). Rachel goes on to articulate this point.

S: What about the reverse situation? If there are any guys who don't fit the male stereotype do they get teased?

R: (Pause) Um. (laugh)

S: Are there none in your physical education class?

R: Um, not really. Oh, there's this guy who's like more sort of feminine.

S: Does he get teased for that?

R: Yeah like they call him gay and stuff.

Similarly, Annette explained the link between dominant constructions of masculinity and harassment of those males who do not demonstrate the characteristics of expected masculinity.

A: Well some sports like gymnastics, if guys did it, like other guys would tease them about it but I don't know why.

S: Well yeah you're right, because if you look at some of the top male gymnasts and ballet dancers they have great physiques.

A: They're so fit and so good at it.

S: So why do you think people make fun of them?

A: 'Cause like it doesn't fit into the ... like ... male sport part

S: Stereotype?

A: Yeah stereotype, yeah

S: What do you think is part of that male stereotype? How should a male act?

A: Rough

S: Rough?

A: Yeah. Tough, mean, aggressive, not like graceful or that, like that's what gymnastics and ballet dancing and stuff is.

S: Ballet and gymnastics - they're not really cool for boys to be involved in?

A: (laugh) No.

S: Where do you think this lack of acceptance comes from? Is it like from the media, friends, parents, teachers or what?

A: Friends I guess - peer pressure.

S: Is it the same for girls?

A: I don't know, like girls sort of um, they don't mind their friends playing soccer or footy whereas if the guys were doing dance and they'll think (laugh) that's a girl thing. What are you doing that for?

S: So you think part of it might be a fear maybe?

A: Yeah, probably.

S: Like he must be a 'poofter' or a 'fag'?

A: Like what are you doing that for? Get away!

S: So that doesn't worry girls so much?

A: No. I don't know why that is, it's just different.

Several researchers have dealt with the issue of homophobia in women's sports (see particularly Griffin, 1991; Lenskyj, 1986, 1990, 1991). Hargreaves (1994) details how conventional femininity does not incorporate images of muscularity and physical power and female athletes who have such physiques have always stood the risk of being treated in a derogatory way. "The implications that athletes may be 'pseudo-men', 'unfeminine', 'gay', 'masculine', 'mannish', 'butch', 'dykes' or 'lesbians' put pressure on heterosexual sportswomen to play the 'femininity game' and stigmatise homosexuality" (Hargreaves, 1994, p. 171).

Interestingly, none of the girls in this study described or were aware of females being treated in a derogatory way for being muscular or powerful. There are several possible reasons for this. The descriptions of harassment provided by the students indicated that the boys in physical education classes were overwhelmingly responsible for being the harassers, while girls and other boys largely represented the objects of harassment. Since the talented, athletic girls often found themselves in mixed friendship groups where they could 'mix it with the boys' and be competitive, there was an acceptance by the group that the less confident, less able students did not experience. Hence, the girls, by being accepted as 'one of the boys', did not experience harassment. There is evidence to suggest that boys at this age are accepting of girls whose skill and competence levels are similar to their own. It is also possible that the girls have

learned the behaviours that will be accepted by the boys in the group, that is, they have found an 'acceptable femininity' and do not overtly challenge the expectations of the boys. The powerful, muscular skilful girls may 'adapt' their behaviour to be less competitive or 'more feminine'. It also seems likely that by including the girls in the group, the boys have a yardstick with which to measure their own skill and competitiveness, as indicated by Tony.

S: Do you think you would prefer to have single sex or mixed sex classes for phys ed?

T: Oh, I'd prefer mixed.

S: Why is that?

T: Well, you get to compete against the girls then, and that might help you to achieve better.

S: How do you mean?

T: Well, compared to them, you play better, more competitive and stuff.

#### Student Responses to Sex Based Harassment

It seems in this study that the harassment of girls at the hands of the boys is one method by which sport and physical education are maintained as a male preserve. The Australian Education Council (AEC) explain that girls in co-educational classes suffer sex-based harassment as part of their day to day routine.

Girls accommodate this harassment differently. Some react with hostility and anger, but it causes many to be passive and docile, restricts their access to space, equipment and attention of the teachers and undermines their feelings of safety, self-confidence and worth (AEC, 1992, p. 5).

It seemed from the students' conversations that marginalising, trivialising and teasing were behaviours characteristic of and constantly observed in their physical education classes and in some cases formed the basis for student non-participation.

According to Denise, some of the harassment directed towards girls was based on an expectation of body shape and size. She discussed the teasing she has experienced and her perceptions of the differences between boys' and girls' reactions.

D: Well, I get on all right with the boys ... not great or anything... they've only just stopped teasing me about my weight.

S: That must have really hurt you.

D: Well it gets you down a lot. Most people don't ... When you do it to the boys they don't really like it.

S: When you have a go at the guys for how they look?

D: Yeah. Most of them say "You shouldn't say that about me". They don't realise that they hurt people when they do it. They should realise that you have to know the person on the inside before you can judge the person on the outside.

S: So does anyone stick up for you when you are being picked on?

D: The girls do cause they know what it feels like. Like \_\_\_\_\_ used to pick on me because I had a big bust and everything. Well, he still does it but only on the rare occasions.

S: That's terrible. I wonder if anyone picks on the guys for having large testicles or a big penis.

D: (Laugh) You wouldn't 'cause they'd be really proud about that.

S: I wonder why it is that the boys would be proud but the girls would be hurt and embarrassed?

D: Hmmm. I don't know.

S: How do you deal with the teasing?

D: I just ignore it.

It was apparent that despite her endeavours to deal with the problem, Denise continued to suffer harassment at the hands of some of the boys in her physical education class. She felt that ignoring the harassment was the best solution because "sometimes they stop". Denise felt that her teacher had limited control over the level of harassment in physical education lessons because the boys would often ignore the teacher or continue the harassment behind her back. It was evident, however, that there was a degree of support obtained from other girls in the class, usually in the form of a return verbal attack on the offending boy/s. Annette also articulated her feeling of powerlessness in overcoming harassment at the hands of the boys.

A: You know, they call us names, like if you're playing football and you accidentally drop a ball like most people do, even if you are a professional footballer, they call you names and just laugh in your face. It's just ridiculous.

S: What do you do about it?

A: There's nothing you can do.

S: Does your teacher try to stop it?

A: Oh, she tries to help out and if the girls are upset, she calls them aside and tries to find out what's wrong. And if she finds out one of the boys has upset her she takes him aside and tells him off but they don't take much notice. They find it funny.

S: Do the boys treat each other like that, or is it mainly the girls?

A: Mainly the girls, but they do treat each other like that sometimes.

S: It is an accepted thing by the boys, do you think?

A: Boys mucking up on boys, they accept it. It's a joke. But they tend to pick on girls more and the girls just take it. They take it seriously.

The findings of the AEC (1992) could also be applied to the girls who participated in this study.

These girls love school. They have made firm friendships with boys as well as girls. But it is hard to escape the feeling that the girls work around the boys. They have learned to protect themselves (to a greater or lesser extent) from the boys' teasing, they stay out of the way in the common room; they accept the rudeness and lack of respect of the junior boys; they are thrilled that some boys will protect them from other boys. (p. 9)

Discussions with the girls in this study certainly gave the impression that there was a great deal of accommodation on their part, of the boys and their behaviour. Some of the students explained how this harassment was either too much to withstand or too difficult to protect themselves from. Annette, for example, saw this harassment as the major reason for girls dropping out of sport.

S: Do you think any of the things we talked about so far have an impact on why girls drop out of sports, particularly in their teenage years?

A: Yeah. Boys force it onto them with comments like "Oh, you're no good", plus girls know that any time you do anything slightly wrong



that boys are going to jump down your throat so they just don't bother trying. They find other things that are more important.

Likewise, Denise and Annette attributed the drop out phenomena to the treatment of girls by the boys.

S: Why do you think lots of girls, when they get to your age, drop out of sport or don't choose phys ed as a subject?

D: There might be a lot of boys in the class. Boys might tease a lot.

A: I don't know. They probably can't handle the comments from the boys and stuff. I just don't worry about them. I just don't care. (Laugh) Some just take it more seriously than others, you know, like some think they're not good at sports because they get teased.

S: Yeah, it's funny how all the people I'm talking to in these interviews all like sport and they're all good at it. I was too when I was at school. I guess it's hard to understand why people drop out because you yourself enjoy it so much and get so much out of it.

A: Yeah.

S: It would be interesting to talk to some of those people who have dropped out to find out why.

A: Yeah. I think it would have a bit to do with other people around them. They probably suffer more from the teasing and stuff.

Cheryl, however, was at a loss to explain why girls would want to drop out of sport and physical education and clearly her involvement in sport has something to do with maintaining a particular body image, which is problematic in itself but goes beyond the scope of this paper.

C: Maybe as they mature, they find other things they'd rather do. I don't really know. I've never had that experience. I don't want to drop out of sport. I don't want to become a blimp. (Laugh) Everyone in my family is really large.

#### Student perceptions of teacher interactions

Scruton (1992, p. 93) in identifying the significant restriction on girls participation and self-confidence in mixed settings, indicated that "... boys have far more contact with



the teacher, receive more attention, talk more in class and are much more 'visible'". Evans (1989, cited by Hargreaves, 1994, p. 151) observed that "... in mixed physical education classes in Australia ... boys tended to dominate the setting and determine the pace and direction of the game being played". Spender (1982) also showed that in secondary school classes, teachers may spend up to two thirds of their classroom time interacting with the boys and that boys dominated two thirds of class conversations. Physical education classes, according to Tinning, Kirk and Evans (1993), are characterised by, among other things, sexism and inequitable teacher attention to pupils. The students in this study, however, had mixed reactions about the demands on teacher time in their physical education classes.

Annette explained how she believed that the boys' behaviour in her class precluded all students from reaching their full potential because the teacher was having to spend so much time in disciplinary actions.

A: Like the girls, we choose health and physical education (an elective subject) to play together but like the teachers have to pay so much attention to the guys so they don't hurt anybody.

S: What do you mean by 'attention'? Like discipline sort of attention or is it in terms of improving skills and that sort of thing?

A: Discipline.

S: So do you get a lot of feedback on how you are going in class? What happens to skill levels?

A: Oh the teacher tries to, tries hard, but every so often there'll be a period of time when the guys aren't mucking around and she'll come over and say "How's it going?" and ask if we're having any problems or difficulties.

S: It seems like they take up a lot of her time.

A: Yeah - it's not very fair.

Denise responded similarly but all of the other students felt that teacher time was equally distributed to male and female students in the class. Without further

observation it is difficult to determine whether this is in fact the case. I do not wish to argue here that students do not have an awareness of what is happening in their own classes, however, I believe that much of the reinforcing of gender roles and expectations occurs at the subconscious level of the hidden curriculum. Leah and O'Brien (1992) explain that as teachers:

we need ... to be aware of how we reproduce the inequalities of the system even when we think we're speaking with liberal, humanist intention. There is research which indicates that even teachers who consciously adopt an ameliorative position with respect to the education of girls are still involved in discriminatory classroom practices (p. 34).

### Student Solutions

After discussing the problems experienced by the girls via the boys' domination, even in sports where the girls had a high level of knowledge and experience, Denise explained her solution.

S: It's really difficult from our perspective too, as teachers, because a lot of the time you just don't see everything that is happening, and when you do, sometimes it's hard to do something about it. Particularly in a class like yours where there are so many boys doing the wrong thing or being aggressive or spiteful. It's almost like a culture that's really hard to overcome. I wonder if you have any suggestions for how the group dynamics and relationships could be improved.

D: Yeah. Our teacher said we might get a male - just to calm them down because the boys tend to listen to a male more. They don't take what a female says seriously.

S: Do you think that's common to most classes or is that just in physical education?

D: No just physical education.

S: I wonder why that is?

D: Well, I don't know, but maybe they think that a female teacher can't do sports or skills as good as a male and so basically they don't think she can teach as good.

Both boys believed that having a male teacher for physical education lessons would be better than having a female teacher but for different reasons. Tony thought that the boys in the class would behave differently for a male teacher because "... like Mr \_\_\_\_\_ - he'd be more stricter, there'd be less mucking around". Chris explained that he thought that "male teachers are more relaxed than female teachers" but have "louder voices" and can "yell a lot". This, he felt, was beneficial in terms of "scaring you into doing the right thing". Clearly these perceptions are tied in with the organisational culture of the school and administration, where males hold most of the leadership positions and tend to take on most of the disciplinary roles. This should be of concern for all physical educators, particularly when other researchers have implicitly linked physical education with a mode of discipline and domination that "encourages physical and verbal attacks and diminishes pupil self-esteem and confidence" (Cohen & Manion, 1981, cited by Humberstone, 1990, p. 203). That students see this as the most appropriate and effective form of discipline, suggests that we, as educators, have a long way to go in terms of fostering alternative and successful classroom management strategies.

#### Student perceptions of Physical Education

Evans (1984) reminds us that

... the problems girls have in relating to physical activity in the secondary school physical education curriculum cannot straightforwardly be reduced to the form or content of that curriculum or to the limits of teaching. Such problems are in part due to the fact

that conventional conceptions of femininity vividly contrast the kind of images which girls normally associate with involvement in sport; images of muscle, sweat and showers. The prescriptions of happiness offered by the media, teenage magazines and (one might add) more crucially the models provided by the family, together play an important part in this process. Against this (extra school) background, the antagonism shown by girls towards physical activity, is perhaps hardly surprising. Beating your male at squash or badminton is not the best way of attracting and keeping a 'steady' relationship. (p. 13)

Interestingly, none of the girls in this study expressed such antagonism toward sport, physical education or physical activity but all were aware that there were some students in their classes who felt this way. The students who were participants in this study were similarly uncritical of the subject, or its organisation. However, I believe this must be viewed in the context of student achievement in the subject. A factor which may have been underlying the students' unwillingness to be critical of physical education is the fact that all of the students involved in this study were achieving good results in physical education. These students were hardly likely to suggest change when they have discovered a formula for success.

In relation to curriculum offerings, the students could suggest little in the way of a proposal for change. Some students, for example, Annette and Rachel recognised that the games and sports offered benefited the boys in that they tended to have a higher initial level of experience and interest in these sports and therefore, usually gained better grades because the length of units of work (four to five weeks) prohibited many students from reaching their full potential. The remaining students were satisfied with the curriculum offerings and made no suggestions for change. Clearly the competitive ethos and values of male-oriented team sports are as deeply ingrained in the psyche of

the students as Vertinsky (1992) indicates they are in the school tradition and the psyche of curriculum implementers.

There seemed throughout many of the interviews an underlying, subconscious desire to maintain male superiority in games and sports. Many students thought that if the girls had the 'upper hand' in terms of experience in some sports, this would create more problems with behaviour and harassment by the boys. Annette and Tony believed that there was little use in changing the sports offered because "the boys just wouldn't take other sports seriously ... they'd just muck up and wreck it for everyone else" or "change the rules" to make games more aggressive and involve more physical contact. It must also be said that many of these girls themselves have benefited from the masculinist, competitive nature of this physical education program and so, have no reason to seek change. Of course, the involvement, interests and needs of the other girls in these classes has to be considered.

### **Summary**

The research findings outlined in this chapter suggests that physical education continues to be marked by sexist traditions and strategies and reinforces the complementarity of masculinity and femininity. The participants in this investigation recognised this polarisation as a biological fact and not as a cultural or social derivative. Tied up with their understandings of gender are essentialist understandings of the ways in which boys and girls and male and female teachers behave and ought to behave. Homophobia and sex-based harassment were presented as problems

underlying the acceptance of difference in physical education classes. Student solutions to the problems of girls dropping out and boys misbehaviour were restrained to increasing the number of male teachers (a move also currently being promoted by the present Queensland government) and adding more team sports. Some further solutions will be offered in the following chapter.

## CHAPTER 5

### Implications - The Way Forward

... Changing schools, curriculum, pedagogy, teachers and students is a complicated and even messy enterprise which best be understood and assisted by theories and policies which recognise the complexity of the process and of individual and group identities (Kenway, 1992, cited by Judd, 1993, p. 99).

Change may be a complicated and problematic process, but a necessary one for equitable educational outcomes for all students to be met. There are a number of ways in which the change process may proceed, including altering the curriculum offerings in physical education, which incorporates the purpose of this research. However, it is important to remember that a change to the physical education curriculum in isolation is unlikely to bring about lasting change while the culture and nature of schooling and its organisational structure are left unchallenged.

### The Curriculum

The physical education curriculum with its domination by sport and games does not “serve the best interests of girls or in the long run, boys in the forms of femininity and masculinity it seems to foster” (Kirk & Wright, 1995, p. 335). What I believe is required is a gender sensitive physical education that intentionally and consciously challenges the patriarchal and ethnocentric nature of the physical education curriculum and challenges students to identify the gendered and gendering practices in games and sports.

I believe that this must also include teaching about sex, gender and sexuality and would agree strongly with Griffin and Genasci (1990) that discussions about gender equity are not complete unless we also address the issue of homophobia because

until we can confront our own homophobia as professional educators and then help our students confront theirs, fear of and ignorance about sexual orientation and gender roles will be major obstacles to eliminating gender inequity in physical education and sport (p. 214).

The principles of social justice and diversity must underpin physical education curriculum and its delivery and students must be taught overtly to recognise and value the multiple ways of being masculine and feminine.

Theory and practice in physical education need to be integrated, a practice which is currently being implemented in the Queensland Board of Senior Secondary School Studies Curriculum documents (which address physical education requirements in the post-compulsory years of schooling). Learning in physical education needs to “allow students to be critical of and reflect about the knowledge that they are learning and the conditions under which they are learning it” (Dewar, 1991, p. 70). This, Dewar (1991, p. 70) goes on to say, represents learning that is reflective, emancipatory and liberatory in that it allows for “a different way of interpreting and understanding experiences and knowledge” and provides a means of validating experiences within larger cultural and societal contexts.

The challenge then, is to seek physical activity which goes beyond the definitions of patriarchal construction, which, as Wright (1992) describes is no easy task because our ways of moving and making sense of our movements are constrained, just as our ways of thinking, seeing and feeling are constrained by the language we have learned as



members of a particular culture. What is needed, is the redefinition and reconstruction of physical education around pleasurable experiences of physical activity, which meet the needs and interests of girls, and which permit “redefinitions of individual female bodies as sites of personal power and control” (Wright, 1992, p. 10).

### Teachers and teaching

The content of the school curriculum, the manner in which it is organised and the strategies used in its delivery, influence what children take away from education in schools (Evans & Davies, 1986). Therefore, it is impossible to separate the gendered nature of physical education from the practices and beliefs of the teachers of the subject. It is essential then, in any program of change, to consider teachers and what values and cultures they bring to the learning environment. MacNamee (1991, cited by Vertinsky, 1992, p. 18) points to the value of the work that physical education teachers could perform in “fostering the well-being of pupils by helping them to come to terms with the way they feel about sex, ability and gender differences, how they react to them and the language they use to articulate those feelings”. Wright and King (1991) indicate that teacher awareness of gender bias is important in recognising that linguistic choices provide a framework through which girls and boys come to form particular relationships with their bodies and emerge from physical education with gendered identities.

The challenge then lies with educational reforms and through encouraging teachers to take them up in active and meaningful ways. This will be a difficult and slow process, particularly when, as previous researchers have found, many physical education teachers (and teacher training institutions) are resistant to change (see for example, Judd, 1993; Flintoff 1990 cited in Hargreaves, 1994; Scraton, 1992; Macdonald & McKay, 1994).

### Schools, Schooling and Policy

The inclusion of knowledge in the curriculum which challenges dominant patriarchal messages is not enough (Dewar 1987b). Leah and O'Brien (1992) remind us that teaching practices which threaten gender identity can raise the fear level of students and cause them to disregard or block out that information. Students then, are unlikely to accept alternative explanations of gender, unless "the conditions in society that contribute to the maintenance of male hegemony are also challenged and transformed" (Dewar, 1987a, p. 464).

A whole school approach must be utilised in order to achieve the goals of equity and social justice. Gilbert (1995) puts this aptly:

If gender is such a pervasive and central aspect of the way girls negotiate their schooling, then it needs to be directly addressed by schools and incorporated in their educational planning. ... [T]he social construction of gender must become a constant issue for discussion, critique and action. This requires a school culture in which masculinity is not privileged or dominant, a curriculum which studies the construction of gender and the inequitable consequences of some of its forms and a fair and supportive environment in which a range of student identities can be constructed and respected. (p. 233)

The development of policies and guidelines will go some way towards ensuring this. The Queensland Department of Education has, for example, formulated policies aimed at ensuring a fair and equitable education for all students. These include the Social Justice Strategy, Gender Equity in Education Statement, Gender Equity in School Sport Policy, Managing Behaviour in a Supportive School Environment, Sexual Harassment Policy and Anti-Racism Policy. A number of national policies also inform the area of equity, particularly gender equity, and these include the National Strategy for Equity in Schooling, the National Action Plan for the Education of Girls in Australian Schools (AEC, 1993) and the National Policy for the Education of Girls in Australian Schools (Commonwealth Schools Commission, 1987). However, as Judd (1993) found, policies such as these often tend to be uni-directional, narrow and do not challenge teachers to identify the discourses of gender permeating the learning environment nor the meanings being constructed from these discourses. There must also be some consideration given to the need for teachers to be actively involved in shaping, developing and implementing policy because “teachers have a perspective on students that is more subjective, more complex and more intimate than the distant stance of policy-makers and academic specialists (Lightfoot, 1983, cited by Judd, 1993, p. 103).

### Language and Discourse

Language embodies power never more strongly/magically as where it renders bodies powerless. (Corrigan, 1986, cited by Vertinsky, 1992, p. 390)

Vertinsky (1992) explains that a great deal of potential for change lies in encouraging teachers within physical education to recognise how pervasively their language constructs gender relations and how this impact on the access of students to learning. It is important to reveal the ways in which language works because it “provides for the possibility of different linguistic choices - choices that may constitute a different social reality” (Wright and King, 1991, p. 210).

The establishment of equitable education must consider challenges to the discursive practices that create and maintain inequitable social structures and outcomes (Davies, 1989a). A necessary step in changing discursive practices must be to challenge the embeddedness of the male-female duality in our consciousness and to teach students to recognise the multiple ways of being which are open to them. The benefits of this are outlined by Davies (1989b, p. 239):

If we can see the way in which the discursive practices within a particular text or used by a speaker (including oneself) locate or position us, then the possibility of refusing that positioning, or even the particular discursive practice itself, and taking up another becomes more readily available...

This then would empower students to recognise and refuse sexist and oppressive discourse and encourage acceptance of difference and diversity.

### **Summary**

A change to the physical education curriculum, as was the original outcome intended from this investigation, is fraught with difficulty if considered in isolation. The importance of the school organisational culture should not be underestimated. Neither

should the role of teachers, language and discourse analysis be overlooked, if effective change in physical education is to be implemented.

## CONCLUSION

Improving access and opportunity for girls in schooling has been a focus since the release of the Commonwealth Schools Commission report on Girls, Schools and Society (1975). Physical Education, as a subject in schools has recently come under fire from feminist authors for its maintenance of a tradition located within patriarchal discourses, favouring the demonstration of physical power, dominance, aggression and muscularity.

Previous research has examined the role of physical education in contributing to the production and reproduction of gendered identities. This paper has contributed to the existing body of research in this area by examining student perceptions of the gendered and gendering practices in physical education. It has examined how students come to understand their own physicality and the ways in which physical education reinforces or challenges the way they see themselves as gendered beings. The complementarity of masculinity and femininity, homophobia and sex-based harassment have been identified as major determinants in the maintenance of sexist traditions and strategies in physical education.

Physical education has the potential to provide liberatory experiences for students and offers the opportunities for students to develop a positive physicality which is grounded in an acceptance of diversity and difference. While dominant social discourses remain unchallenged by schools, teachers, curriculum documents and

students, the opportunities for girls to experience themselves outside of dominant cultures of femininity remain limited. Until we, as educators, can confront our preconceived ideas about gender, and teach students to recognise theirs, dominant constructions of gender will continue to be a major obstacle in overcoming inequality in access, participation and outcomes for girls in physical education.

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**THE UNIVERSITY OF ADELAIDE**

Department of Women's Studies  
The Undercroft, Ground Floor Napier Building

**PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET**

Dear Student and Parent/Guardian

This year, I am undertaking a research project as part of my Master of Arts degree in the Women's Studies Department at the University of Adelaide.

My study is looking at the relationship between gender and physical education. I am hoping to speak with year nine students who have selected HPE as an elective in their junior course. The discussions will provide an opportunity for students to reflect upon both the positive and negative aspects of their involvement and experiences in HPE and comment on the current curriculum offered.

The study is completely confidential, so information you give will be reported in such a way that neither you nor any other individual would be able to be identified.

During term 4, I will organise a time and place at school for us to meet. The meeting would take 20 - 30 minutes and would most likely be at lunch time or after school. Our meeting would be more like a 'chat' than a formal interview.

I would like to tape our conversation if that is okay with you. Your real name would not be linked with the tape and the tape would be erased as soon as I have finished taking notes from our conversation. If you would prefer not to be tape-recorded I am happy just to take notes instead. If you would like to check a copy of my notes before I use them, then please indicate this on the consent form. You can be certain that no identifying information will be used in the study. I will use an invented name to attach to your interview notes.

If you decide to participate in the study, you may change your mind and withdraw at any time. You do not need to give me a reason if you choose to withdraw. You do not have to answer questions or discuss any issues you do not wish to discuss and you are free to withdraw your interview material at any time until I complete all the interviews.

Please don't hesitate to contact me at school if you want more information about the study. If you have concerns which you do not wish to discuss with me directly, please contact my supervisor, Myra Betschild, at the University of Adelaide or Peter Coughlin, Principal, Bremer State High School.

I look forward to your participation and the chance to hear your ideas and experiences relating to HPE at Bremer State High School.

Yours sincerely

Sandy Braiuka

Bremer SHS

Myra Betschild

Department of Women's Studies  
University of Adelaide  
GPO Box 498



**THE UNIVERSITY OF ADELAIDE**

Department of Women's Studies  
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**PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM**

**Study of the experiences and involvement of girls in Junior HPE**

Research undertaken by Sandy Braiuka as part of her Master of Arts (Women's Studies) degree within the Women's Studies Department at the University of Adelaide.

**STUDENT CONSENT:**

I, (print your name) \_\_\_\_\_ have been provided with a description of the aims and purpose of this research. I give my permission to participate.

I understand that my name will not be connected with any information that I provide and that an invented name will be used to identify me. Neither will the identity of any other person be revealed in connection with this interview.

I am aware that my participation is completely voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time. If I choose to withdraw, I do not have to justify my actions. I can withdraw the information that I provide at any time during the information gathering stage. I am under no obligation to discuss issues or information if I do not wish to do so.

I understand that I can be supplied with information about the results of this investigation, if I so desire.

- YES/NO                      I agree to have the interview tape recorded.
- YES/NO                      I wish to check the notes of the interview.
- YES/NO                      I wish to receive information about the findings of the study.

Signed (Participant) \_\_\_\_\_  
Signed (Witness) \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**PARENT/GUARDIAN CONSENT:**

I, (print your name) \_\_\_\_\_ have been provided with a description of the aims and purpose of this research and give permission for my daughter/son \_\_\_\_\_ to participate.

Signed (Parent/Guardian) \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_