

Filling in the Gaps: Women's Physical Education History in Canada

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There is no question that women's sport history is a "hot" research area, as Vertinsky (1994) has shown. Sport is a "sexy" topic, both literally and metaphorically, as sporting women contest traditional definitions of sport and their own abilities. Yet, close examination of the nature of recent research begs another question: Why has physical education faded from the research agenda?

Examination of works related to women's physical education history reveals a gap in the rich tradition of feminist scholarship on this subject area (e.g., Vertinsky, Verbrugge, Fletcher, McCrone and Lenskyj), in Canada. Spanning a period of thirty years, Canadian works have run the gamut from descriptive/narrative to those informed by feminist scholarship. However, many of the more critical and insightful of the latter were authored by others outside the area of physical education and sport history.

As many historians studying physical activity moved to concentrate primarily on sport they left historical analysis of physical education behind. Besides largely ignoring the physical experiences of some females since not all girls and women engaged in sport. For some their only physically active experience came through physical education classes. The historical study of this discounted group thus may, in fact, hold clues to a broader understanding of girls' and women's physical experiences.

There is much to be learned from the lived experiences of females involved in physical education. They could provide insight into the struggles and challenges encountered, as well as illuminating their efforts, whether rebellious or accommodating. The latter group could provide new knowledge of their own reactions to their changing physicality.

If, as Mangan and Park (1987) suggest, there is a strong link between the two, why have so few researchers considered physical education in the same light, that is,

as a means of examining the social construction of gender? What can be done to reclaim this important area of research? How do we move towards a more comprehensive, inclusive history of girls and women's physical education? There is no question that works such as those produced by Lenskyj (1990, 1992), Smith (1988) and Fletcher (1987) have broadened the scope and nature of questions asked of historical data related to this subject. Much more could be uncovered by examining and drawing from works on educational history. Just as there is a link between female physical education and sport, there is a stronger link between female physical education and girls' and women's education history. However, this relationship has hardly been explored.

Juxtaposing these two subjects will enable the historian to situate finite details related to physical education in the social institution of education. Such a relationship illuminates reasons behind the fluctuating significance of physical education as a profession, as a discipline, and, possibly, a research area. Connecting these two areas also sheds light on how females confronted and addressed challenges to their educational experiences. As the works cited have demonstrated, fusing female physical education history with female educational history bodes well in filling in the gaps.

Through the examination of secondary sources this paper traces the evolution of women's physical education history in Canada as it moved from the descriptive/narrative style to a more critical feminist analysis. In doing so, this research argues that the feminist perspective provides a broader, deeper understanding of women's physical experiences.