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Re-igniting the gender agenda in the 21st Century

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Individual presentation

10. Health and Physical Education

Abstract content:

25 years ago Scraton's (1992) pivotal research on the reproduction of gender relations in girls' Physical Education (PE) identified curricula, pedagogy and leadership as key. Since then our theoretical understandings have developed, most notably through the recognition of the significance of the intersections of gender with ethnicity, class and disability (Flintoff et al, 2008). Yet, continued concerns over girls' health and disengagement in PE (Women's Sports Foundation, 2012) suggest a need for contemporary empirical feminist work informed by these theoretical shifts (Kirk & Oliver, 2014). This presentation reports on a study that explored the extent to which PE policy and practice have shifted in the last 25 years and the role of contemporary PE in reproducing and challenging gender relations.

The research was conducted in four schools serving diverse student populations, reflecting the change in school demographics since Scraton's (1992) research. Elmhurst High and Woodside Secondary are co-educational, consisting predominantly of South Asian, Muslim students. Willetts Park, also co-educational, serves a predominantly White student population. Bliss Hill is an all-girl's Islamic faith school. Similar to Scraton's (1992) study, all schools are based in a socio-economically deprived area in the north of England. A critical interpretive, feminist lens was adopted and data were generated through 70 lesson observations of girls' and boys' PE and interviews with 10 PE teachers.

Despite the introduction of a National Curriculum in 1992, the findings suggest that little has changed in PE content during the intervening years. Lessons are predominantly games based, with a traditional teacher-led pedagogy. The enduring practice of offering a differentiated curriculum to boys and girls, and teachers' gendered assumptions about boys'

and girls' abilities reinforces powerful gendered discourses around hegemonic masculinity, heteronormativity and ableism that inform identities, power relations and girls' relationship with PE.

Yet, this research also identified significant differences in practice. Whilst Scraton (1992) noted a key focus of PE to be the encouragement of active leisure interests, this study highlights the preoccupation with assessment and the measurement of competency in narrowly defined terms. This change in focus is linked to a broader remit within schools around achievement and is reflected in a preoccupation with school inspections, student league tables, and attainment targets. This accountability adds to the pressures experienced by teachers whose concerns and anxiety over high levels of surveillance and accountability becomes manifest within their lessons through a distinct lack of fun and enjoyment.