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The role of women in physical education, from the 1960s to the present day (France - Europe)

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This special bilingual issue features contributions on the role women have played in PE (Physical Education). The challenge is to offer a comprehensive picture of their individual and collective journeys, their diverse identity constructs and their specific didactic and pedagogical orientations, but also to pinpoint the major steps taken in enabling them to secure key positions in the school institution, beyond purely teaching roles. Coincidentally, this issue of the *STAPS* journal follows in the wake of a special section on women and gender recently published in *The International Journal of the History of Sport* (Vertinsky & Hedenborg, 2018). The purpose of the supplement, which was edited by Patricia Vertinsky and Susanna Hedenborg, was to update research on the role of women in the promotion of physical and sporting activities. Our objective is to cast a fresh spotlight on the female protagonists of PE, focusing on their ability to overcome the obstacles encountered in the teaching, school inspection and trade union spheres, based on historical and sociological approaches developed in France and in Europe.

UPDATING RESEARCH ON PHYSICAL EDUCATION IN SCHOOLS

One of this issue's key aims is to suggest innovative ways of re-examining the history and sociology of physical education – and school education in the wider sense – through the prism of gender and women's role, actions and involvement in the school system and its institutions. By reconsidering the history of the discipline from the perspective of women's lives and taking into account the power relationships between men and women, this issue seeks to question the structure, the cultural and social reference points, and the institutional workings that define the profession and give precise meaning to its culture and content, to the institutional and corporatist struggles that animate it, to its emancipatory aspirations, to the strategies developed, to the networks harnessed, sometimes in a competitive manner – physical education and sporting cultures, the worlds of gymnastics, sports and clubs, teaching unions, the inspectorate, etc. – and, of course, to gender boundaries and therefore to potential transgressions, which new responsibilities and stances, as well as educational and professional advances, can bring to light.

By seeking to understand the complex dynamics of physical education in schools through the lens of women in PE, this issue of the journal falls into line with current educational research trends, which are marked by a growing interest not only in the different teaching spheres (Farges, 2017), but also in the individuals who “produce” academic subjects (Cardon-Quint & d'Enfert, 2017), together with their career paths and their relationship with the profession (Robert & Carraud, 2018). Social demand for knowledge about education, its different levels – primary or secondary – and its protagonists, adds weight to our current preoccupations. Updating research on

the topic therefore offers a tangible response to the numerous questions posed, while demarcating an expanding research field, in which relationships of dominance are very prominent. While some have examined education from the perspective of female students (Mayeur, 1979, 2008), socialisation outside the school environment (Prost, 1981, 2004) and the illusion of gender mixing in schools (Mosconi, 1989), others invite us to look at education through the prism of gender (Rogers, 2009) and to view the school institution as a professional environment that leads to the construction of gender-differentiated paths, professional identities and stereotypes spread through the content children are taught (Duru-Bellat, 1990, 2004; Buisson-Fenet, 2017).

Research on the female teachers who have helped shape the history of the profession contributes to this advancement. On this topic, publications from the English-speaking world keep a close eye on the feminisation of teaching, training and professional integration, on status categorisations, on career strategies, on exemplary figures and on the relationship between secular and religious teaching (Acker, 1989; Prentice & Theobald, 1991; Essen & Rogers, 2003). In France, the literature on secondary education's female pioneers during the Third Republic – i.e., 1870-1940 – (Mayeur, 1977; Margadant, 1990; Efthymiou, 2002; Rogers, 2007) and on women teachers in the second half of the 20th century (Cacouault-Bitaud, 2007) examines the tension between the identities of teachers and the identities of women, between public careers and private lives, and between external and internal perceptions of the profession, with special attention paid to standout initiatives. Initial analyses, which examined the struggle to establish a professional community, were followed by discussions on whether there may have been a “golden age” for female teachers during the 1960s, before the profession entered a decline, with increasing uncertainty over the personal choices made in the midst of career and family pressures. In a wider sense, one of the challenges is to understand the links between cultural representations of “femininity”, education and social practices (Rogers, 2009), which are also coloured by persistent gender differentiation within the profession.

Studies in the field of physical education hinge on a fundamental and specific notion, that of the body and bodily education. The work published offers a sensitive appraisal of women in PE (Munoz, 2002; Ferez, 2005; Robène, 2005; Castan-Vicente, 2009; Ottogalli-Mazzacavallo & Szerdahelyi, 2018), focusing on the diversity of their career paths and endeavouring to link together not only the individual and the collective, but also career models and model careers, at different levels of the sporting and status hierarchy (Szerdahelyi, 2014; Érard, 2016; Érard & Szerdahelyi, 2019). While this research re-examines the history of physical education through the experiences of individual women, telling the story from a social angle (Michon, 1983) and from a generational standpoint (Michon & Caritey, 1998), other work has gained prominence by broaching PE from a sociological perspective. Examples include analyses of: the construction of pluralist experiences, where gender, professional and social identities intersect (Perez-Roux, 2011); the early careers of individuals through the filter of the social, cultural and gender domination of PE teachers (Mierzejewski, 2016); orientation strategies suffused with gender norms for the teaching of students specialising in sports sciences and physical education (Érard & Louveau, 2016).

HAVE WOMEN BEEN OVERLOOKED IN THE HISTORY OF PHYSICAL EDUCATION?

The legacy of previous research on women in sport cannot be ignored. Indeed, the attention placed on the female protagonists of PE has come as a result of the transformation undergone by the history of sport, which has shifted from a history of “female” sport (Arnaud & Terret, 1996) to a history of sport and gender (Terret, 2005) under the impetus of foreign historiographies and pioneering French psychoanalytical and sociological approaches to female participation in so-called

“male” sports (Louveau, 1986) and the construction of gender differences and bodily norms (Labridy, 1987; Davisse & Louveau, 1991, 1998). But make no mistake, there are still very few studies on the role of women in school-based physical education and we would like to thank the authors featured in this issue for their contributions, which go some way to filling this historiographical void. Women are rarely considered when individual careers in PE are studied. They are pushed to the margins of this school subject, constricted by the representations assigned to them and at the mercy of generalizing stereotypes and decisions taken by others on their behalf.

To paraphrase Michelle Perrot, has the history of physical education simply ignored women? The articles published in this issue refuse to resign themselves to this idea and, by following common paths, they lay down a number of milestones within this evolving field of research. The first of these paths involves paying close attention to the voices of women in PE. Along with a variety of written sources – official reports, government files, trade union bulletins, private archives, as well as books and articles published by the individuals studied – not to mention ethnographic observations when these articles are of a sociological nature, oral sources are used by each of these authors, proving their worth as a way of “overcoming resistance and liberating a repressed desire to speak about oneself, buoyed by the thought that one is being taken seriously and treated, finally, as a historical protagonist” (Perrot, 1998, p. 19).

Reliance on oral sources, with all the methodological precautions such material requires, is not unrelated to a second common path, this time chronological. The majority of these articles form part of a history of the present that is rooted in the 1960s. This decade, which is viewed by women as a “golden age” of teaching (Cacouault-Bitaud, 2007), sparked a period during which a wealth of new career opportunities opened up for women in PE, against a backdrop of highly vocal social, cultural and sexual contestation (Dreyfus-Armand *et al.*, 2000), in a context where sporting models characterised by “masculinity” and “femininity” were being transformed (Charroin, 2013) and at a time when schools were experiencing an educational revolution that is now considered to be among the century’s most significant: gender diversity (Prost, 1981, 2004).

From the 1960s to the present day, these articles display a number of points of convergence, but also various possible levels of interpretation, providing parallel paths to the formulation of the essential questions. On the one hand, this project puts forward an examination of physical activity and school education that takes an institutional perspective, by opening with little-known contributions on the trade union involvement of women in PE and then moving on to teaching itself, in addition to covering the efforts made to win over the school inspectorate, a lever of power and of professional and social innovation.

On the other hand, this feature focuses on specific processes that enabled the accession of women to spheres in which they could secure professional recognition and legitimacy, specifically: exclusion / integration, construction of forms of vulnerability / struggles against vulnerabilities, labelling of differences / the fight for gender equality and equal opportunities for the disadvantaged, etc. These processes have led to new dichotomies in the history of physical education, according to power balances that have developed both between the genders and within them.

Moreover, this publication offers scientific perspectives based on historical, but also sociological approaches, with an emphasis placed on appraising the history of women in PE in France. In addition, this national history is put in further perspective by foreign experiences. The Irish and Swiss viewpoints provided cast light on both cultural specificities and common hesitations, both regarding the careers of women in the world of physical education and gender mixing in schools.

The final section features contributions that highlight unique individual careers, as well as focusing on the collective construction of socio-professional identities. This approach is essential, insofar as it enables us not only to comprehend the career paths of the pioneers and the stances

adopted by teachers, at their respective levels, but also to gain an insight into the construction of women as individuals (Sohn, 1995), rather than simply trying to understand women as a homogeneous group, without differentiation.

THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN PE

The avenues pursued throughout this special issue suggest that physical education is actually multidimensional, as evidenced by the experiences and career paths of the women who have worked in and transformed the field. The role of women needs to be re-examined not only from a national and international perspective, but from an angle that deconstructs the very idea of a universal experience, as well as that of generic discourse and representations, so as to gain an understanding of all career paths and identity constructs, and grasp the entire spectrum of commitments and contributions made to altering what is labelled as “masculine” and “feminine”. In short, what is needed is a vast body of comparative studies for which we hope this project will be an effective catalyst.

The text submitted by Jacques Gleyse, who opens this special feature under the “*Carte blanche*” banner, provides a valuable account of the women involved in the Federation of National Education Unions (“*Syndicat général de l'Éducation nationale*” - SGEN), their struggles, their achievements, their beliefs and their occasional disappointments. This glance at the construction of their professional, trade union and feminist stances relies chiefly on an analysis of the periodical *Le Corps Enchaîné* from 1977 to 1987. The author draws primarily from the articles that appear in this trade union journal and from a wide array of material compiling individual and collective memories, images and records of trade union mediations, so as to recount the world and its transformation during an era when the question of the role and emancipation of women in French society was beginning to be raised with greater insistency.

Emmanuel Auvray offers a historical study geared towards formalising the biographical, intellectual and praxical journey of PE teaching fellow Nathalie Gal-Petitfaux, who was involved in sporting federations before gaining recognition at university level. The article's objective is to identify the key motivations behind the knowledge she produced and disseminated in the field of PE in the early 1980s, a period marked by the rise of female didactic specialists and researchers specialising in the Science and Techniques of Physical and Sporting Activities (STAPS in French). He demonstrates how this “didactic pioneer” of school swimming falls into the class of paradoxical female teachers (Szerdahelyi, 2016) who challenge the symbolic orthodoxy of gender and power relationships within both PE and the STAPS, which are inextricably linked to the issue of male-female equality.

Clémence Lebossé and Carine Énard provide their own examination of a remarkable career with their study on Lilyane Forestier, who attempted to gain influence in the Youth and Sport Inspectorate (1964), a “bastion of masculinity” in the early 1960s, and later in the Education Inspectorate in charge of PE (1976). Hailing from a working-class family and having started out as a PE teacher in Paris, Lilyane Forestier's career may, at first glance, appear improbable. And yet, by creating and seizing opportunities, she was able to climb the ranks and advocate for a particular conception of PE that was sometimes described as going against the grain, given its rooting in primary education, and which contributed somewhat to perpetuating a differentialist vision of individuals, founded on a positive interpretation of “feminine” specificities.

Cécile Ottogalli-Mazzacavallo and Loïc Szerdahelyi examine the originality and importance of Annick Davisse's contribution, over the course of her career, to the transformation of gender polarities within PE. This analysis of the individual course she plotted through the system reveals that she was a key player in a social innovation process geared towards greater gender equality. A

PE teacher who went on to become a trade union and political activist, before taking on a role as a regional teaching inspector for PE, Annick Davaisse gradually gained access to positions of power, which allowed her to rally support around the cause of individuals “left behind” by the school system, including girls in PE. The didactical/pedagogical approach she formalised over the course of her career, around a dialectic of difference and togetherness, mobilised a growing network of trade union, political and scientific figures, eventually leading to its partial incorporation into PE programmes in the closing stages of the 20th century.

Based on a different definition of those who are “left behind” by schools, Yacine Tajri and Jean Saint-Martin analyse the origins of the thinking behind the design of baccalaureate-level PE tests tailored to disabled students. By focusing on the role and efforts of PE teacher Monique Pasqualini in developing these tests for an audience that has traditionally been excluded from such assessments, the authors describe how this grassroots educator was able to raise awareness among key resource individuals, both within the field of PE and in the political and medical spheres, and rally them around her cause, so as to provide all students with equal access to physical education in school. The challenge regarding the qualitative democratization of PE is also raised, based on the thinking that has emerged from the medical, corporatist and government spheres.

Following on from this series of historical contributions, Sarah Pochon examines teaching practices through the prism of the sociology of PE. Adopting a socio-didactic approach to her research, the author profiles five PE teachers assigned to an elite senior high school in the heart of the most prestigious Paris neighbourhoods. Her article combines a variety of investigation techniques – *in situ* observations repeated over an extended period of time, comprehensive interviews with teachers, as well as student questionnaires – so as to describe the local conditions under which PE classes take place. This allows her to demonstrate how women in PE must conform to the institutional norms of schools reputed for their academic excellence, and how professionals in this sphere also appear to be influenced by the social makeup of their students.

Elise Awáida Carton and Stéphane Carpentier divert our attention towards “female” experiences in another country, by analysing women’s involvement in physical education teaching in Ireland. In this Catholic country, where the Church exerts control over education, the values that characterise family units built around a maternal figure have contributed to the construction of a quite unique society. However, women tend to disrupt these values simply by teaching PE, a subject geared towards educating the body in a physical and sporting sense. Using a qualitative sociological approach, the authors draw up a typology of female involvement in the teaching of physical education, while also considering their entry into the realm of physical activity as a form of emancipatory engagement.

Lastly, the article by Manon Cattani and Grégory Quin, featured in the “*Nouveaux chantiers*” section, looks at “female” physical education in Switzerland. The authors present the initial results of a study that is still a work in progress and which examines the situation in the Canton of Geneva, potentially illustrating the failure of Swiss school systems to adhere to regulations on gender mixing, despite being obliged to provide girls with physical education since 1972. This research highlights the feeling held by women in PE that they always have “something to prove”, both to their colleagues and to their students. It also analyses the rationale that leads women to embark upon a career in physical education, one of the peculiarities of which is that it conveys very powerful gender representations.

Should boundaries be placed around this project? It could be said that numerous boundaries already exist, but equally numerous are the avenues for future research. Firstly, from a chronological perspective, this initial scientific endeavour, which focuses very much on the post-war 20th century, needs to be enriched with studies centring on the 19th century and the first half of the

20th century, so as to better understand the movements and changes that have affected the positions of men and women when it comes to the construction of PE teaching environments and, consequently, the construction of the identities of men and women within the profession. Secondly, it is important to acknowledge the necessity of comparative studies from an epistemological standpoint, by extracting new sources of inspiration from the international historiography on the topic. This will involve drawing from comparative perspectives and adopting approaches that examine “female” experiences within the sphere of physical activity in other countries (Verbrugge, 2012; Vertinsky & Gils, 2016; Vertinsky & Hedenborg, 2018). Additional analyses of a methodological or theoretical nature could further advance this vast project. Research that broaches the question of the body through the prism of gender, but also through that of intersectionality, could also generate stimulating avenues for exploration (Bohuon & Quin, 2016). It would also be interesting to look deeper into the issue of the knowledge taught and the unevenness with which it is passed down, despite the best efforts of PE teachers (Couchot-Schiex, Coltice & Cogérino, 2009), in mixed schools where gender segregation is institutionalised (Guérandel, 2016). In many respects, therefore, the research presented here provides fertile ground for further thinking, inviting readers to imagine possible orientations for future research.

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