



Unlock Research Research for Physical Educators

Research Journal of the Month
NOVEMBER 2003

Sport, Education and Society.

In print since March, 1996, *Sport, Education and Society* (SES) now has completed 16 issues (2 issues per year). Produced by Carfax Publishing which is a member of the international Taylor & Francis Group (Headquartered in London), SES has its roots in the UK and, more particularly, at Loughborough University. Subscription rates for 2003 are US\$91 for individuals. Indexed or abstracted in many services, ERIC will provide the most readily available search resource in the USA. The journal is produced both in hard copy and online (information at <http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals/carfax/13573322.html>) and may be accessed at many university libraries through both ProQuest and EBSCO. Tables of contents are available in advance of publication (without cost) by registering at the Taylor and Francis website.

Edited or co-edited from the outset by Loughborough University's Professor John Evans, SES has the comfortable look and high editorial quality of most Carfax journals – attractive, businesslike, and consistent. Book reviews are a regular feature. Because they are both longer than the norm for journal reviews and thoughtfully critical as well, some have been as much discussed among academics as the main articles in the same issue. The journals own self-description has remained constant:

SES is an international journal which provides a focal point for the publication of research on pedagogy, policy and the wide range of associated social, cultural, political and ethical issues in physical activity, sport and health. The journal concentrates on both the forms and contexts of physical education, sport and health education found in schools, colleges and other sites of formal education, and the pedagogies of play, calisthenics, gymnastics, sport and leisure found in familial environments, various sport clubs, the leisure industry, as well as private fitness and health studios, dance schools, gymnastic clubs and rehabilitation centers.

Given allowance for problems of nuance within the differing vocabularies of British and American English, that is an entirely accurate description of what appears in SES – so far as it goes. The journal truly is international, both in terms of memberships on the Advisory and Editorial boards and in terms of the nationalities represented by contributing authors. It does present research reports on a regular basis, although technical and theoretical essays also are included. The primary focus always has been exactly as specified in the statement of aims and scope quoted above – cultural, political, and ethical issues in physical activity, sport, and health. And, although the scope often does range widely through sport clubs, health clinics, literature, and family life, the venue of primary interest for most authors has consistently been school physical education.

Before undertaking a critical assessment, I want to assert that whatever else, SES makes for lively reading in a subject field wherein I find too much of the writing (and ideas) just plain boring. Consider some titles from Volume 8 (2003):

- "Butches, bullies and buffoons: Images of physical education teachers in the movies,"
- "Poetic representations in sport and physical education: Insider perspectives,"
- "Constructing expert knowledge: A case study of a top-level professional soccer coach,"
- "The school sport coordinator program: Changing the role of the physical education teacher?"
- "Football culture in an Australian school setting: The construction of masculine identity," and
- A sense of connection: Toward social constructivist physical education."

I can testify that, for me, each of those lived up to the promise of its title. There can be no question that SES is a prime resource for research (of the sort specified above) and stimulating ideas about physical education.

That having been said, however, it is my distinct impression that among physical educators in the USA this is the sport and physical education research journal least often honored by actual reading (or by individual subscription). One explanation for that situation may rest with the level of insularity among educators at all levels. We are not cosmopolitans by nature or nurture, and despite the appearance of many familiar names within the pages of SES (Mary O'Sullivan, Amelia Lee, Ron McBride, Paul Schempp, Matthew Curtner-Smith, Donetta Cothran, Catherine Ennis) we often are more comfortable with homegrown products. Given, however, the obvious focus on physical education, the scarcity of first-class journals that regularly publish scholarly work dealing with that topic, and the ready availability of SES in college and university collections, such neglect is more than anomalous – it must signal something beyond the handicap of status as a foreign publication.

Which brings us back to what is not made explicit in the statement of mission for SES. From the first issue to October of 2003, the journal has been the primary outlet for authors who take a critical view of physical education as a social enterprise. Here, the word "critical" does not simply indicate a posture of criticism for flaws or inadequacy. In this context the word denotes a range of approaches to social research commonly referred to as critical approaches, all of which fall under the broad umbrella of the qualitative tradition and all of which share several concerns.

First, researchers in all of the branches of critical social science (Marxist, feminist, postmodern, poststructural, Foucaultian, etc.) are concerned about the fact that researchers represent relatively powerful people doing something "to" (as distinct from "with") relatively powerless people. In terms of design and method this means that critical approaches involve various strategies to overcome that imbalance of power and to ensure that all research products are used in ways that responsibly take that asymmetry into account.

A second and related concern is directed to the inequities in how power is distributed in society. Thus, critical research focuses on the lives and experiences of people who traditionally have been marginalized and thus disadvantaged – e.g. women, minorities, and persons with disabilities). That concern, when coupled with a commitment to the socially responsible uses of research, creates an emancipatory agenda (active engagement to improve social conditions) for many critical researchers. When that agenda is reflected directly in their reports, however, scholars raised within the more traditional norms of positivist science feel that a crucial norm for the researcher's proper role has been violated.

All of that has led to a great deal of internecine squabbling among academics, but such intellectual turf battles certainly do nothing to explain why so many mainstream physical educators have found SES unattractive. It has been my own experience, for example, that physical educators usually welcome well-intentioned criticism of "the establishment" and all of its taken-for-granted common sense notions (precisely the assumptions that critical researchers have in their crosshairs). Why have the research reports and didactic writings of critical theorists been found neither entertaining nor informative? I have only the datum of my own unsystematic observations, but if you have come this far you deserve the best answer I can devise.

That portion of each issue of SES that is devoted to the work of critical scholars reflects a particular sort of social behavior. There is a tendency for people who think of themselves as doing something to challenge the status quo to create a safe haven of mutual support. Often that consists of creating a membership group (club) in which a common language (this is how we speak), a common set of icons (this is whom we revere), a common description of the opposition (they are the enemy), and a common venue for sharing ideas (this is our place).

All of that is functional behavior for the necessary process of discovering what the members do not hold in common – so that new clubs and safe havens can be created. Without pushing that metaphor too far, it is easy to see how one consequence of forming an "insider" group is making clear that everyone else is an "outsider." Thus, a great deal of the writing of critical scholars is impenetrable for the rest of us – and intentionally so. That makes for reading that is more than simply difficult and challenging, it creates text that leaves readers resentful about being marginalized as outsiders.

Beyond the secret languages of critical researchers, is what happens when they find themselves either challenged or, far worse, ignored. The natural response is to escalate the level of rhetoric – particularly in ad hominem descriptions of those perceived to be "in power." Some artfully employed hyperbole is no more than a minor sin in academic disputation, but when used to characterize the people who constitute most of your reading audience, the result is predictable – they stop reading. I suspect that teachers and teacher educators have felt unnecessarily maligned (if only by inference) in some of the items published in SES.

Finally, there is the distinct possibility that some readers have found that the shoe of social criticism fits all too well when it conforms perfectly to a description of what happens in school physical education classes. I feel certain that many critical theorists intended nothing more than to suggest that the law of unintended consequences ought to be given serious consideration in the gym. Most teachers are quite aware that there is a hidden curriculum at work in every lesson. Accordingly, I don't read malice as the accusation writ large in SES.

I do squirm more than a little, however, when I face the fact that some of my own teaching may have had the consequence of repressing some ideas and constraining some students – with my fully conscious intention. That is to say, when the vivid descriptions found in critical writing leads some readers to find themselves guilty of maintaining their position by ensuring the disadvantage of others, does anyone wonder that they might not rush to read more?

That is my effort to account for the lack of popularity for SES. There are, however, two other things I wish to make clear. First, not all of the reports and articles in the journal are prepared by scholars who use one of the critical traditions for doing research on physical education. Virtually every issue contains accounts of inquiry that would be completely at home in the *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport*, or the *Journal of Teaching in Physical Education*. For that reason alone I believe that you miss a good opportunity if you allow yourself to be put off by any thing else in the journal.

Second, some sampling from recent issues leads me to the conclusion that the "adolescent phase" (my characterization) of critical theory in physical education is winding down, and if what it stands for still is anything but warm and fuzzy, I now find much less in the journal that could be regarded by anyone as outright unfair or objectionable. If you will scan a few issues of SES in 2004, you might find yourself far more invigorated and challenged than abused. At the least, you should take advantage of the publisher's offer to provide advance e-mail delivery of tables of contents. For free, what can you lose?

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