ABSTRACT

This paper explores the ways in which 'gender issues' have been addressed in the official texts relating to the National Curriculum for Physical Education in England and specifically, the conceptualisations of gender, sexuality, masculinity and femininity that can be identified as inherent in, promoted by, but also excluded from these texts. It is argued that in important respects, silences speak louder than words and that neither silence nor the use of 'neutral' language is in any way neutral. These characteristics of the texts are identified as having important implications in relation to the degree to which the National Curriculum for Physical Education serves to (I) demand or encourage that established and inequitable practices and beliefs will be challenged, and (ii) prompt and support the development of new practices in which currently marginalised (or absent) discourses will be accorded a higher status. Attention is then directed to the scope for teachers and teacher educators to 'fill the silences' in official texts in ways that may serve to extend the 'gender agendas' addressed by and reflected in physical education curricula and teaching.
Acknowledgement:


INTRODUCTION

This paper takes a focus that reflects a new line of inquiry in the context of my longstanding engagement with the complex and contested development of a National Curriculum for Physical Education (NCPE) in England (see Penney & Evans, 1999). Gender has not been the major focus of my research or writing on contemporary physical education and I do not have a background of years of engagement with literature addressing gender, sexuality and identity in education, physical education and sport. However, I have been increasingly aware that the matters of whether the NCPE has been a policy that has embraced the varied needs and interests of girls and boys, coming from different class, cultural and religious backgrounds, with different sexualities; of how it has portrayed and positioned those differences for the teachers charged with providing all children with a statutory entitlement; and of whether the official texts outlined an entitlement in physical education that would challenge long-established sex-differentiated patterns of curriculum provision and staffing in physical education and provide children with a physical education capable of reducing the dominance of gender stereotyped attitudes, beliefs and patterns of participation in physical activity and sport; are ones that have remained inadequately explored amidst the rush of development and revision of the National Curriculum. My interest is therefore, in reviewing whether the NCPE has been a policy that has clearly embraced and would serve to actively promote greater gender equity in physical education, in particular by extending current understandings of gender in physical education and by foregrounding gender as a matter for teachers and pupils to engage with in their implementation of the NCPE. The paper is written from an education policy sociology perspective with the aim of pursuing the contribution that such a perspective may make to furthering the cause of gender equity in physical education - in policy and in practice in schools.

Discussion focuses on the ‘official’ NCPE texts, produced by governments or curriculum agencies, that have provided the reference point for the development of physical education in state schools in England through the 1990s and into the 21st century. I have re-examined these texts to specifically consider what gender discourses have been present, where in the texts, and thus to critically reflect upon the relative status and prominence of gender discourses relative to other discourses, and the particular discourses that have or have not been included in these texts. Ultimately much of my attention has been directed towards silences in the texts, with my arguments being that silences can certainly speak louder than words and that neither silence, nor the use of ‘neutral’ language, is in any way neutral in policy development. As Noble (1999) has explained, readers interpret silences as well as words. They can have powerful meanings and important implications for future practice. Decisions to retain silences or to use particular language therefore need to be acknowledged as conscious and political decisions that have important implications for future practice and specifically for gender equity in education.

The silences that I identify in relation to the NCPE are three-fold, relating to the inconsistencies in the presence of gender as an identified issue within the texts; to the limited range of gender discourses included within the texts; and to the sustaining of silences amidst implementation of the NCPE. While pointing to shortcoming of current texts, I therefore also consider the productive potential that is consequently inherent in the texts and
in our recognition of the scope for ‘slippage’ in policy implementation (Bowe et al, 1992). In considering future developments in physical education that may signal greater gender equity, I therefore argue for changes in official texts, but also for greater encouragement for teachers and teacher educators to look to actively ‘fill’ silences in current texts in ways that will serve to raise the profile of discourses of gender equity, and extend the range of gender discourses that teachers and pupils engage with. My own and others’ research focusing upon the National Curriculum has clearly demonstrated that official texts are far from finished texts but also that we can not assume that transformations of them in implementation will signal a greater presence of discourses of equity (see Graham with Tytler, 1993; Penney & Evans, 1999; Penney & Harris, forthcoming).

Finally I should stress that while my discussion focuses upon texts specifically associated with developments in England, the issues raised are ones that can be pursued in the investigation of other policies, at other times or in other places. The value of adopting a comparative perspective in policy studies is worthy of note here. Often it takes a comparative perspective to reveal what could be different, or what is missing from the policies that we are most familiar with and may well have come to view unproblematically. In several respects an investigation of the progressive development of the NCPE in England through the 1990s illustrates the value of such a perspective. I deliberately focus much of my attention upon two official texts that have long since disappeared from view; the Interim Report and Final Report produced by the original NCPE working group in 1991 (DES/WO, 1991a,b). These texts highlight what has not been said in relation to gender and equity in subsequent NCPE texts, but themselves featured notable silences that it is important to pursue. I also consider the most recent version of the NCPE which, as all of the new National Curriculum texts, featured the introduction of new ‘principles for inclusion’.

COMPROMISES AND POLITICS

Before taking a closer look at the NCPE texts, it is critical to set them in context and specifically, in the context of a centrally directed policy process. The power-relations inherent in the process and the ways in which these demanded that writers make compromises to accommodate government agendas and directives are well documented, in relation to physical education but also other subjects and the curriculum as a whole (see Evans and Penney, 1995; Penney and Evans, 1999; Graham with Tytler, 1993). The compromises and contradictions that we see in official texts thus need to be regarded as significant characteristics of the texts but also as arising from a context in which those appointed to advise and/or draft texts have had openly limited autonomy. The inclusions and omissions that I identify reflect the limits to autonomy and the fact that the process of compromise in policy developments features struggles between different interests, not all of which have equal status.

GENDER ON THE AGENDA

It is appropriate to begin by registering that there has been some focused commentary on gender within the NCPE texts. As others have noted, the Interim Report from the NCPE working group (DES/WO, 1991a) provided what in the context of subsequent texts, can be seen as extensive commentary on ‘equal opportunities in physical education’ (Hargreaves, 1994; 2000; Talbot, 1993). Since the publication of the Interim Report the NCPE texts have featured a dramatic loss of depth in discussion and a reduction in the strength of the messages being sent out to teachers about the action expected of them in relation to equal opportunities in physical education. The Interim Report stood out for not only identifying equal opportunity as ‘a leading and guiding principle for physical education’ (DES/WO, 1991a: 16) but also the need for teachers to focus upon the individuality of pupils and
furthermore, to view this positively. The working group advising the government at that time stressed that

...mere access cannot be equated with real opportunity. The distinction between access and opportunity is crucial. In some schools, girls and boys, able-bodied and disabled, from a range of cultures and ethnic background may be said to have the same access to the physical education curriculum: no children are prevented by virtue of their sex, religion, ability or race from taking part. But even when this desirable state of affairs exists, do children also have equal opportunities to learn and express themselves through and in physical education? The effects of attitudes and expectations of teachers, the preconditions of access, the interactions within mixed-sex, mixed-ability and multi-cultural groups, and the previous experiences and relative ranges and levels of the skills, knowledge and understanding of the children must also be considered.

(ibid.: 17, original emphasis)

In a further move that openly questioned the legitimacy of common practices and perceptions in physical education, the group identified a number of issues that in their view, demanded 'particular thought and consideration' and upon which they would expand in their final report. These were:

a. the public nature of success and failure in physical education;
b. the competitive nature of many physical education activities;
c. the legacy of single sex teaching and teacher education in physical education;
d. moves towards mixed sex grouping, sometimes without an educational rationale, and without consideration of the conditions under which mixed sex teaching and single sex teaching might be more successful or appropriate;
e. the biological and cultural effects of being female or male on the behaviour considered appropriate for girls and boys of different cultures;
f. the physical nature of physical education, and the emergence of sexuality during key stages 2, 3, and 4, providing both problems and opportunities for physical education in challenging body images, sex stereotypes and other limited perspectives which constrain the choices and achievements of disabled children, and of both girls and boys;
g. the effects of some culturally restricted interpretations of masculinity on the place and value of dance in the school curriculum, and on boys’ opportunities for dance experience and education;
h. the barriers to young people’s involvement caused by the restrictive ways some sports and forms of dance are portrayed and practised;
i. the rich potential for physical education to transcend categories of race, sex and learning need, through nurturing the value of individual contributions in group situations, and through presenting a wide range of cultural forms and experiences which reflect our multi-cultural society; and
j. the treatment of physical education in sex discrimination legislation and the varied levels of understanding of its effects on curriculum physical education, extra-curricula activities and school sport.

(ibid.:17)
The group acknowledged the complexity of these issues, but also stressed the need for teachers and teacher educators to engage with the complexity, stating that

> Working towards equality of opportunity in physical education involves not only widening and ensuring access. It involves the understanding and appreciation of the range of pupils’ responses to femininity, masculinity and sexuality, to the whole range of ability and disability, to ethnic and cultural diversity, and the ways these relate for children to physical education.

(ibid.: 18)

The limits of the existing understanding of these issues amongst both teachers and teacher educators was implicit in their comment that ‘This will entail, both in initial and in-service training of teachers, the critical review of prevailing practice, rigorous and continuous appraisal and often the willingness to face up to long held beliefs and prejudices’ (ibid.: 18).

In their final report to the government at the time (DES/VO, 1991b), the working group dedicated a chapter to what they maintained was a ‘guiding and leading principle’ for the subject. They identified that the role of teachers should be ‘…to foster respect for fellow human beings; to question the stereotypes which limit children’s behaviour and achievements; and to challenge, whenever necessary, instances of sexism and racism’ (ibid.: 15). They stressed the need for schools to ‘…include equal opportunities considerations among the criteria by which they select the content of the physical education programmes, so that all children have the opportunity to experience a range of physical activities within both National Curriculum physical education and extra-curricula school sport’ (ibid.: 58) and stated that ‘In particular, a broad and balanced programme of physical education, sensitively delivered, can help to extend boys’ restricted perceptions of masculinity and masculine behaviour’ (ibid.: 58). While not denying this potential, there is a need for such statements to acknowledge that it is not only boys who may have notably narrow perceptions about these issues, or about femininity and ‘feminine behaviour’. Other research has highlighted that broadening both teachers’ and pupils’ understandings in relation to these issues remains a need and challenge in contexts of physical education and specifically, the NCPE in England (Williams and Bedward, forthcoming; Penney & Harris, forthcoming).

Returning to the matter of grouping, the group explained that ‘Choices of mixed or single sex groupings in physical education should be made for educational reasons, and after considering the conditions under which they might be most successful and appropriate’ (ibid.: 57). Notably, they pointed to the need for moves to address gender in schools to also engage with experiences (and inequities) beyond them, with ‘…recognition of the different opportunities which are available for girls and boys to acquire particular sets of skills outside of the school curriculum’ (ibid.: 57). The report thus made it clear that different grouping would be appropriate in different contexts and that a move away from sex-differentiated curricula should not be interpreted as demanding wholesale adoption of mixed sex grouping.

Addressing the matter of kit for physical education, the report prompted further challenges to stereotypical conventions. The group stated that ‘Considerations of safety, comfort and freedom of movement should override conventions associated with being male or female’ (ibid.: 58). In later discussion of ‘cultural diversity’ the report also identified the need for negotiation to facilitate participation and enjoyment within particular religious conventions and drew attention to the need for teachers to be sensitive to the costs of clothing and equipment for physical education. Here the text thus acknowledged the importance of the
constant interplay of issues of gender, ethnicity and class in relation to equal opportunities in physical education.

As indicated, the extent of this commentary on equal opportunities issues within these texts was regarded as significant and an accomplishment on the part of the group, and one that was not replicated in the production of later NCPE texts. My discussion below reflects a concern that in celebrating the commentary we are in danger of overlooking characteristics that are important considerations in relation to the degree to which official texts will succeed in prompting greater gender equity in contexts of the implementation.

SILENCES: LIMITING, EXCLUDING AND RELEGATING AGENDAS

Firstly, as international observers may be particularly aware, the above commentary needs to be recognised as a selective and arguably limited commentary on ‘gender issues’ with several issues partially addressed rather than fully explored, or notable by their absence. While pointing to the need to broaden perceptions of masculinity, commentary did not extend to discussion of masculinities and femininities, and the value of this plurality when considering the linkages between gender and pupils’ diverse backgrounds and identities in relation to culture, ethnicity, religion, class, ability and sexuality. While Francis (2000) maintains that emphasising multiple masculinities and femininities serves to maintain rather than challenge the dichotomy of masculinity and femininity and its inherent power-relations, I am inclined to view it as a first step in extending visions and understandings beyond singular stereotypical norms.

As indicated, there has been some engagement with cultural diversity. However, comprehensive exploration of other issues central to any concern with equity and specifically, gender equity, has been clearly lacking. The absence of any extended commentary on for example, sexuality, needs to be viewed as a lost opportunity to prompt extensions in understandings and changes in practice, and probably also, limits to what could be included in an openly political text. In England education has mirrored the ‘sports establishment’ in failing to

…create a discourse to explain and deal with discrimination against homosexuals and, more specifically, against lesbians in sports. Silence implicitly condones taken-for-granted ways of thinking and behaving, which occur subtly and during informal activities, and which are hurtful and harmful to non-heterosexuals.

(Hargreaves, 1994: 260; see also Clarke, forthcoming)

This is an example of a very explicit silence in and of the NCPE texts. However, there are also other arguably more subtle silences, that may be equally important when we look to interpretations and implementations of policy. Specifically, when we take a closer look at texts such as the working group’s reports, we can identify omissions that identify the texts as generating contradictory or inconsistent messages for readers. If we are concerned to promote fuller understandings and expressions of equity within physical education, consistency and reinforcement of messages seems a crucial matter to address in official texts.

In relation to these concerns, several points are worthy of note, not least of which is the physical position of much of the commentary addressing equal opportunities (and in the latest version of the National Curriculum, inclusion, see DfEE/QCA, 1999) within the official texts of the NCPE. The status and potential impact of many of the points made have
seemed compromised by what can only be seen as ‘relegation’ to the end of or appendices to texts. This location certainly appears contradictory to the claimed lead status of the principles being addressed. Furthermore it is a position that undoubtedly places in jeopardy the likelihood of any recommendations being pursued in practice. The appendices of any text do not carry comparable weight to the main text and many points raised in official NCPE texts regarding equal opportunities, gender, cultural diversity and currently, inclusion, may simply never be read by many teachers. In the context of repeated and imposed policy directives, the attention of many teachers charged with implementation of new requirements will focus firmly upon what is regarded as essential and an immediate priority. Readings and responses are selective and do give rise to very clear ‘slippage’ in the policy process (Bowe et al, 1992). Thus while we may argue that separate or focused discussion can signal the importance of gender equity as an issue for the subject and the profession, we also need to recognise that sections of text lying outside of (and invariably following) the detail of the statutory programmes of study and new assessment frameworks to be introduced, may well be casualties of such slippage. Hence, in my view, the heightened importance of repeated reinforcement of the relevance of equity issues throughout policy texts. The following all too brief discussion illustrates my concerns and is illustrative rather than exhaustive. Furthermore, while focusing upon extracts from one of the official NCPE texts it is a line of critique that is applicable to many policy texts relating to physical education.

Above I indicated sections of the NCPE official texts that for many teachers, would be their priority and hold their attention. One such section was the ‘recommended programmes of study’ for physical education. This section of the working group’s final report (DES/WO, 1991b) addressed the breadth and balance of the curriculum. However, here the text failed to reinforce points addressed within the sections specifically dedicated to ‘equal opportunities in physical education’. In outlining their recommendations regarding the areas of activity to be incorporated within the various key stages of the curriculum, the group made no reference to the need to consider issues of gender or cultural diversity. Instead their attention focused on the practicality of their recommendations and the flexibility that they accorded to schools, ‘as requested by the Secretaries of State’ (DES/WO, 1991b: 26). The impression was that pragmatic rather than educational or specifically, equal opportunities issues, would be the first and legitimate point of reference in curriculum design. The section of the text that addressed the programmes of study associated with each specific area of activity could similarly be viewed as ‘full of omissions’. For example, given the emphasis above that dance could ‘help to extend boys’ restricted perceptions of masculinity and masculine behaviour’ (DES/WO, 1991b: 58) we could expect the programme of study for dance to feature explicit prompts to teachers to explore this potential. The absence of reference to gender and sexuality in recommendations such as those below has to be seen as not only an omission, but also a loss – in the status accorded to equal opportunities and of an opportunity to prompt its expression in practice. For key stage 3 dance (for pupils aged 11-14), it was recommended that pupils should:

- be taught to perform set dances showing an understanding of style;
- develop and use appropriate techniques and styles to communicate meanings and ideas;
- be guided to create and perform short dances showing sensitivity to the style of accompaniment;
- be taught to describe, analyses and interpret dances recognising stylistic differences, aspects of production and cultural/historical contexts; and
- be taught to support their own dance compositions with independently researched material, and, where appropriate, record dance in words and symbols.

(DES/WO, 1991b: 33)
Equal opportunities and/or gender issues also failed to feature in the discussion of criteria for assessment within the final report, or in the group’s emphasis that the context of assessment needed to have meaning for pupils (DES/WO, 1991b: 42-3). Both the criteria for assessment and the context of assessment are clearly important considerations if we wish to advance gender equity in physical education. The tendency may well be for a ‘gender blind’ or ‘same for all’ approach to be viewed as the desirable or defensible approach. However it is an approach that ignores important differences between pupils that we should be actively responding to in teaching and assessment if we are to maximise opportunities for all pupils to progress and enjoy success in the subject.

Finally by way of example, there was important recognition in the NCPE final report that ability can restrict pupils’ access to extra-curricular physical education and sport and an emphasis of the need to use the extra-curricular arena to extend the breadth of pupils’ experiences. Regrettably there was no accompanying prompt for teachers to move from the commonplace practice of male staff taking responsibility for organising extra-curricular activities for boys and female staff doing likewise for girls, with the result that extra-curricular programmes invariably promote stereotypical images of masculinity and femininity and narrow perceptions of the range of physical activities that men and women can participate in (see Penney and Harris, 1997; Bass and Cale, 1999).

Absences such as these have been replicated in texts that have superseded the NCPE working group’s final report and arguably, have also become progressively more obvious and significant as cuts have been made to the length of policy documents and the scope of discussion inherent in them. As the development of the NCPE has progressed much of the commentary specifically directed to equal opportunities issues has disappeared altogether, or was relegated to accompanying and notably non-statutory guidance texts. Far from being portrayed as a leading principal, the impression has invariably been that equal opportunities and more specifically gender issues are simply ‘not an issue’ in or for physical education (see also Figueroa, 1993; Evans and Davies, 1993; Barton, 1993). The next section pursues the matter of gender being positioned and portrayed as ‘off the (National Curriculum Physical Education) agenda’.

GENDER OFF THE AGENDA?

In the context of this overlying silence on gender, the implicit messages inherent in and portrayed by the official NCPE texts can be deemed to take on an enhanced significance. Recognising the ways in which particular requirements and particular language serve to legitimate inequities in gender relations in contexts of physical education and sport is crucial if we are to design policies that give different messages and/or encourage ‘alternative readings’ of notably conservative official texts. Following others (Hargreaves, 1994; 2000) I suggest that in its form and content the NCPE has been openly gendered and has repeatedly failed to prompt an extension of notably limited understandings of gender in physical education. Here I pursue some key characteristics of the NCPE in relation to these claims. The aim is to illustrate that even if apparently excluded from the texts, gender issues were very much embedded in them, and set to arise from them.

One of the issues that has consistently featured prominently in debates about the NCPE has been the breadth and balance of the curriculum outlined as a statutory entitlement. Previous commentaries have pointed to the progressively privileged position that was accorded to games following the government’s response to the working group’s Interim Report (see Evans and Penney, 1995; Penney and Evans, 1999) and the parallel reduction in requirements for other areas of activity to feature in the entitlement curriculum. The privileging of games is significant in relation to our interest in gender on at least two counts; curriculum content and organisation. Invariably the two issues are inextricably linked. Games
remains an area of physical education frequently associated with sex-differentiated patterns of provision, with sports stereotypically regarded as exclusively ‘men’s’ or ‘women’s’ being provided for boys and girls respectively, and typically also staffed by male and female teachers respectively. The ‘flexibility’ of the NCPE requirements has enabled this practice to continue. Weiner’s (1999) statement that a sex-divided curriculum was ‘finally ushered out by Margaret Thatcher’s Conservative administration with the introduction of the national curriculum in 1988’ (p.32), is simply not true in the case of physical education. Amidst an impression of neutrality, the NCPE served to hold inequality in place (see also Skeggs, 1994).

Williams and Bedward (forthcoming) have stressed that silences in the NCPE need to be seen as presenting important opportunities for change, not only barriers to progress. Silences may mean that texts fail to require or offer encouragement for progressive developments, but they certainly do not prevent such developments. The requirement for all children to experience invasion, striking/fielding and net/wall games can be fulfilled in ways that openly reproduce and legitimate stereotypically gendered patterns of provision and participation, or in ways that actively seek to challenge such practices and the perceptions about participation in particular activities and about masculinity and femininity that they generate amongst both girls and boys. Thus while Hargreaves (2000: 140) has stressed that

…the ‘hidden curriculum’ of competitive team games, more than any other aspect of the physical education curriculum, replicates conventional notions of gender differences. Male bonding is encouraged, aggression and sexism are endemic, and boys quickly learn that the sporting man is a symbol of masculine character; those who are poor sportsmen are despised and ridiculed as "less than male",

we need to balance this with recognition that games can be a context in which very different attitudes and behaviours are celebrated and encouraged. Not for the first time, we can see the crucial role that initial teacher training has to play in the translation of policy ‘into practice’. Initial teacher training remains the key forum in which ‘alternative’ readings of and responses to conservative policies can be encouraged and nurtured. However, as Flintoff (1993) has previously observed and Brown and Rich (forthcoming) have more recently reaffirmed, we can not assume that there will be interest in or support for such action in initial teacher training. Furthermore, as I discuss below, even if teacher educators and/or student teachers have a commitment to engage with gender equity, current training requirements in England openly fail to offer either encouragement or support for the commitment. In essence recent government policies relating to initial teacher training have served to openly dissuade deviations from conservative readings of the National Curriculum (see Evans, Davies and Penney, 1996).

In addressing the breadth and balance of the curriculum, the marginalisation of areas of activity other than games (that in some instances are no longer a compulsory part of the entitlement curriculum) is a further important consideration in relation to gender issues. Once again, we have to acknowledge that the absence of a requirement for coverage does not preclude schools extending provision in ways that will openly engage with gender equity concerns. However, neither does flexibility in policy texts ensure progressive responses. For many teachers, one of the most welcome features of the order issued in 1992 was the choice to include or alternatively (and appealingly for many male teachers, see Penney & Evans, 1999) omit dance from the curriculum at key stage 3, for girls, boys, or both girls and boys. In Hargreaves (1994; 2000) view the government’s rejection of the NCPE working group’s recommendation that dance should be a compulsory activity within the curriculum for all pupils signalled the loss of an opportunity to radically reshape many physical education curricula and specifically, to challenge the gender stereotyping inherent in them. Some
teachers in some schools are challenging boys’ and girls’ perceptions about dance, about who can and should participate in what forms of dance. But in others, the picture of provision, the opportunities arising, and the attitudes promoted are very different and far less progressive. There is every potential for boys to be ‘…systematically shut off from an expressive movement experience and are schooled into physical robustness and aggressive competition, whilst girls are schooled into creativity and co-operation’ (Hargreaves, 1994: 153). Outdoor and adventurous activities is another area of activity that is not required but may be included in implementation NCPE. From a gender equity perspective the flexibility can be seen as a further loss of an opportunity to ensure experience of activities that may offer particular potential to extend understandings of and attitudes towards gender in physical education (Humberstone, 1993). However, in the case of both Outdoor and Adventurous Activities and dance, we should avoid the temptation to assume that a different activity in and of itself, will signal greater gender equity in physical education. It is clearly naive to assume that extending the range of activities required will guarantee more equitable provision and experiences. Other areas of activity can reinforce narrow perceptions of masculinity and femininity in relation to physical activity and sport as much as games. McFee and Smith (1997: 70) make the point that ‘…if we seek to make dance more accessible to males by ensuring "...masculinity through athletics in dance" (Hanna, 1988 : p.217) we are in danger of simply reinforcing traditional images of masculinity : thereby bringing about no more than the situate rebirth of ideology’.

Similar points can be made regarding the way in which the latest version of the NCPE in England has raised the profile of participation in ‘other roles’ in sporting contexts, such as the role of official or coach. The development of skills, knowledge and understanding in relation to these roles has thereby been formally established as ‘legitimate knowledge’ within the new NCPE. Diversifying teaching and learning to promote experience of ‘other roles’ may help to make physical education a subject that more girls and more boys may enjoy and experience success in. However, if those children (girls and boys) who have traditionally felt marginalised by the dominance of performance discourses are to now feel that they and their particular skills and interests are valued, there is a need to challenge the portrayal of the ‘other roles’ as the (inferior) ‘other’ to performance. Furthermore, we need to recognise that gender stereotyped images and understandings can be promoted amidst a focus on leadership or officiating as much as performance. How will boys react to a girl taking on a coaching role for their warm-up or skill-practice? Will girls feel that they can legitimately coach boys? Will boys be willing to undertake choreography for a dance performance and would girls accept a boy in this role? Questions such as these demonstrate the scope for the curricula developed from the new NCPE to either reinforce or alternatively, actively challenge and extend pupils’ perceptions about who can legitimately ‘do what’ in physical education and sport. Arguably they also point to the inadequacies of the three principles for ‘inclusion’ that teachers in all subject areas now have a statutory duty to pay ‘due regard’ to in their implementation of the National Curriculum, of:

- Setting suitable learning challenges;
- Responding to pupils’ diverse learning needs; and
- Overcoming barriers to learning and assessment for individuals and groups of pupils.

(DfEE/QCA, 1999: 28)

While recognising that each of these principles can be used productively as a focus for addressing gender equity issues in physical education, currently there seems little guarantee of such a response. Once again it is notable that the commentary on inclusion is clearly limited in its depth and scope, was positioned after the detail of the programmes of study within the NCPE text, and was not reinforced in other sections of the text. In the final section
of my discussion I therefore consider the matter of marginalisation and silence being characteristics of policy texts that are carried over into teacher’s texts in implementation.

CONCLUSION : GENDERED POLICIES; WHAT PROSPECTS IN PRACTICE?

The flexibility in the statutory requirements for the NCPE may be argued as essential given the very different school contexts in which implementation has to occur. Undoubtedly, if we are looking for openings for progressive practice that will further gender equity in physical education, it is an invaluable characteristic of the NCPE. However, as I have emphasised, it can also be seen as an inherent characteristic of the official texts, since by its very nature the flexibility does not ensure that all teachers or all teacher educators will engage with gender issues. There is extensive scope for ‘slippage’ (Bowe et al, 1992) in the interpretation and implementation of the NCPE. It is a policy that was designed and destined to be interpreted differently in different schools, by different teachers, with varying resources and personal expertise to draw upon. The 1990s have clearly demonstrated that this has presented the potential for both conservatism and creativity in practice and this remains the case in the context of teacher’s implementation of the ‘new’ NCPE. Silences on gender equity issues in the latest official texts seem to be being echoed in early implementation (see Penney, 2001).

So what are the future prospects for gender equity in the context of the NCPE? As previously emphasised (see Penney & Evans, 1999) responses to policies need to be understood in relation to the political, economic and institutional contexts in which they occur. In important respects, contemporary contexts can be seen to offer limited support for creativity in implementation of the NCPE, and furthermore, as presenting considerable pressures for teachers to instead reinforce the dominance of established (and gendered) discourses, that promote and celebrate elite performance in a narrow range of games. Given the high status and public profile of inspections of schools, adopting a technicist approach within safe and clearly legitimate (and thus dominant) frames of reference may be seen as not merely preferable but the only possible response in implementation. There seems little encouragement or support for risk-taking or deviations from texts that inspectors will recognise, or texts that parents (whose custom is to be attracted and nurtured in the education market, see Bowe et al, 1992; Penney and Evans, 1999) will also recognise and value. In these circumstances the claimed ‘spaces for action’, freedom and flexibility in implementation seem in danger of being inaccessible in reality. Space for action that will signal resistance to stereotypical patterns of provision, images and attitudes, that will enable masculinities and femininities to be expressed in and promoted via physical education and sport, and that will prompt diverse social, cultural and religious values to be embraced and celebrated, may regrettably be not merely unexplored, but unexploorable amidst other expectations and priorities. Mahony’s (2000) observation of the absence of discourses of gender equity amidst discourses of effectiveness is important. The two need not be mutually exclusive, but regrettably,

Conceptions of the ‘effective teacher’ and headteacher are being redefined in ways which render invisible the role of schools in contributing to the construction and maintenance of gender inequalities. Teachers’ responsibilities to challenge these and other inequalities are being removed as the purposes of schooling are articulated around a narrow form of economic instrumentalism.

(ibid.: 239)
Undoubtedly, there are pockets of progressive practice. But that is a far cry from the potential that seemed to be offered by the development of a NCPE. As indicated above, initial teacher training remains the key arena in which readings of official texts are shaped and in which future teachers will develop opinions about the readings that are both possible and legitimate. It is a forum in which student teachers can be encouraged to actively explore the ‘scope for slippage’ and ‘fill the silences’ inherent in official texts in ways that serve to challenge the dominance of established gendered discourses and introduce and/or and raise the profile of alternative discourses. It is where boundaries to thinking and actions should be openly debated, challenged and extended if we are to succeed in establishing ‘new gender agendas’ in physical education in the years ahead – within and despite the constraints posed by a still largely conservative official National Curriculum text. Thus we can lament, but must also continue to actively oppose the degree to which requirements for initial teacher training in England serve to erode opportunities for creativity in the interpretation and implementation of the NCPE (Evans et al, 1996). Work in initial teacher training and continuing professional development seems essential if the opportunities inherent in the revised NCPE to promote greater understanding of the complexities of gender equity in physical education and to facilitate advancement of practice that embraces these complexities, are to be explored. Currently, the commentary on gender equity within the text is marginally positioned and provides very few insights into how teachers can respond to the complexities of gender in their teaching.

In looking to the future, my emphasis is therefore:

- of the need for an extended and more consistent commentary on gender equity in policy texts;
- of the potential value of adopting a comparative perspective in policy studies, specifically from the viewpoint that a comparative perspective may serve to reveal what could be different, or what is missing from the policies that we are most familiar with; and
- of the need to be proactive in bringing gender equity to the fore in interpretation and implementation of official texts.
REFERENCES


**ENDNOTE**