curriculum, in New Zealand Physical Education

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Abstract

This paper investigates how social hierarchies, as one aspect of a hidden curriculum associated with physical education, contribute to gender construction within co-educational secondary schools in the New Zealand context. It stems from a broader study, investigating how teacher beliefs, programmes and practices contribute to gender construction within co-educational secondary schools in the Canterbury region. In this paper I explore how physical education supports the replication and legitimisation of socially desirable forms of masculinity and femininity. It is in essence, a critique of the ways in which school physical education and the hierarchies that exist within it draw on and reinforce dominant discourses of gender, and the effects this has on both males and females.

Note – this paper is based on an extract from a paper presently under development/review.

Key Words
Gender, Social Construction, Hidden Curriculum, Masculinities, Femininities, Physical Education

Introduction

It is commonly agreed by researchers that sport and physical education are powerful sites for the visible demonstration and social construction of male and female differences (Brown, 1999; Messner & Sabo, 1990; Scraton, 1992; Shilling, 1993; Talbot, 1993; and Wright, 1996) and are historically masculine institutions. Physical education provides a vehicle through which teachers reflect assumptions about males and females physical abilities and interests in physical activities, such as boys are stronger than girls, all boys like physically aggressive sports, girls can't play with boys, and boys are more skilful than girls. Teachers use these assumptions to justify differentiation in their practices and treatment of students and in doing become agents for the reproduction of gendered policies, priorities and practices (Scraton, 1992; Tauber, 1998; Wright, 2001).

The reproduction of gendered policies, priorities and practices, in physical education impact on both girls and boys. These include the continued expectation of girls to meet stereotypical forms of femininity, boys to meet stereotypical forms of masculinity or the exclusion of individuals from particular activities based on gender. In this paper I explore how physical education supports the replication and legitimisation of socially desirable forms of masculinity and femininity. Through the use of composite representations I will outline the hierarchical groups that appear common across physical education classes and explore the way in which these draw on and reinforce dominant discourses of gender, and the effects this has on both males and females.

Methodology

The research utilised a narrative research approach. The aim of narrative research is not to analyse all sorts of narratives and stories, but to examine various kinds of materials and common elements from the narrative (Mishler, 1999; Polkinghorne, 1988). This researched approach incorporated semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions in an endeavour to elicit ‘accounts’ of classroom experiences, from both teachers and students of physical education. The interviews and focus group sessions examined teachers’ and students’ understandings of masculinity and femininity, and the hierarchies and different expectations of achievement and behaviour that exist in physical education classes.
Teachers and students involved were representatives of four co-educational secondary schools in the greater Christchurch, Canterbury region. All co-educational secondary schools in the Canterbury region, fourteen in total, were sent invitations to participate. The four schools involved were the only schools who responded to the request. These four schools were situated in a rural settlement, a semi rural area, and two suburban schools. They were also a mixture of state schools and independent schools. Twenty students, a mix of boys and girls, across Years 9 – 13, and four teachers, two male, two female, offered narratives surrounding the gendered beliefs and practices that are inherent in physical education classes.

Data analysis in this study was guided by the process of constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). After an overall sense of the information was gained, the analysis process worked toward the two main tasks of data analysis in interpretive description specifically, “identification of themes within coding categories” and “identification of themes across coding categories” (Knafl & Webster, 1988, p. 197). These tasks were supported by two basic analytical procedures, that is, “making comparisons” and “asking questions” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 62).

The analysis did not deal with the personal narratives of individual students and teachers but instead focused on the socio-cultural level through examining the core narratives appearing across the data. In this way analysis reflected different students’ and teachers’ collective beliefs, expectations, practices and experiences regarding gender in physical education.

The results of this research are presented in this article as four composite representations. The four representations characterise ‘typical’ students from each of the four most commonly identified hierarchical groups, as discussed by students and teachers involved in the research. The four representations are a compilation of quotes extracted from the interview transcripts of both students and teachers. They represent the common thoughts of the interview participants. These four representations describe how four composite characters, Donald, Katie, Robert and Penny, view their physical education classes, and the role they have within these.

While these findings present individuals who provide representations of each of the four hierarchical groups, it is important to note that the groups are not rigid, and that in different contexts the groups may differ. However they were apparent in all of the four schools researched, and reflect the commonalities of membership to the four hierarchical groups, that twenty students and four teachers identified, within the physical education programmes studied. These findings should also not suggest to the reader that all students fit nicely into the four hierarchical groups outlined, as there was evidence within the research that highlighted individual students that do not fit clearly into a set category. There are students that move between groups, or fit into more than one group depending on the context. However what these findings do is provide us with an entry point into the sort of individual that is representative of the hierarchical groups evident in the four physical education settings studied.

Findings

The reproduction and legitimisation of hegemonic masculinity/femininity and ideologies of gender result in part from the hierarchies that exist in the structure of physical education classes. The hierarchical nature of physical education classes act to reinforce the domination of ‘masculine’ males over ‘other’ males and all females.
Hegemonic masculinity in the physical education setting is best represented by a student such as Donald. He was described by his peers and teachers as; physically very able, a boy who enjoys physical education, has heaps of energy, is competitive, concerned about winning, more aggressive than others in the class, dominant in misbehaviour, physical activity orientated, confident, boisterous, fast, tough, cocky, bossy, sometime arrogant, ‘plays’ better than ‘the others’ and one of the ‘top’ or ‘sporty’ group.

While the students involved in this research used many derogatory terms, such as bossy and arrogant, in their descriptions of a student like Donald, they still identified that they would like to be like. When asked which group is the most admired, students were adamant that it was the “top one” (Student Groups D and C) and outlined that this group was most admired by “the middle people” and “the lower people”. Students did identify that the girls may want to belong to another group, however this did prevent Donald’s group from being the most admired.

Teachers perceived that students such as Donald are overly academic, so saw physical education as an area where they should be provided with opportunities to show their competence and really excel at. This is not to suggest that some of the top boys were not seen to be both academically and physically able, but teachers indicated that they saw physical education as providing an avenue for those top boys that achieved only in physical education and/or sport.

When Donald talks about his experience of physical education he suggests that...

This is my best subject. I’m really into physical education, and can’t wait to get going every time I go to class. I’m always one of the first ones out of the changing room. I get sick of having to wait for the others in the class to get out of the changing rooms before we can get started. The people I enjoy being with in physical education are mainly the other guys like me, there is the odd girl who is good enough to play with us, but there aren’t many of them. When we play a game like soccer, we are still miles better than most of the girls. Generally most of my group are good at a range of things; we are not just good at one thing. We are more skilful, fit, stronger and more capable than anyone else. Others might think that I am cocky or bossy, but really I just want everyone to do better so that we can be more successful and have a better chance of winning. I get frustrated when groups of people won’t have a go, and I don’t see why I should make an effort to involve them. It’s their own fault if they are left out, they are just lazy or not very good. I don’t care about those that aren’t interested – why should I bother passing to them if they are just going to muck it up or not get involved anyway. It’s their own fault that they aren’t involved, they don’t make any effort.

While the ‘group’ that Donald is in is not always the group consisting of the most members, it is the group that dominates in physical education. Students perceive that this group is the group that is most catered to by teachers, given the most choices in terms of what activities are done/not done and given the most freedom to control the class. While Donald’s group represent the hegemonic form of masculinity within the physical education classes studied it was perceived that the most dominant and accepted form of femininity was not solely shaped by physical abilities, as it so evident for their male counterparts. Penny provides a representation of the most socially desirable, form of femininity within the physical education classes studied, as presented by the students and teachers interviewed.

Penny is most commonly described by teachers and fellow students as being of average physical ability and belongs to the middle group or ‘cool’ girls. Some suggestion was made
that this “group tends to be girls, [and] there are a few boys but is predominantly girls” (Teacher A - Male).

Student groups recognised that the “girls probably want to be in the middle [group] because they want to be like everyone else” which included not participating as “they want to be with their friends”. Teachers also suggest that students like Penny have good interpersonal skills, more supportive skills and are typically dominant verbally in discussions. However, at times the Penny’s of the class appear more interested in socialising than in participating in physical education. Teachers also perceive this group of girls as much more capable at expressive movement activities, as opposed to the sport skills that the likes of Donald possess.

Penny describes herself as...

One of the girls that come out of the changing room on mass. We take ages to get changed because we are busy chatting to each other, and then we wait till everyone is ready to go before we depart to the gym. We are pretty laid back about the whole thing. I really enjoy some parts of physical education, especially when I get to work with my friends. We are not as good at sport or as strong as the boys in the class, but we work together much better than them. My group are better at following instructions and getting stuff organised, whereas the boy’s just rush ahead and then make mistakes. All they care about is winning, but we help each other out more, with heaps of encouragement and support. I get annoyed when our teacher just does what the boys want to do. It seems like it is just easier to do it this way and avoid the grief that they get when they do something that the boys don’t like.

Where hegemonic masculinity is based primarily on physical ability and valued above all other masculinities and femininities, the physical education class acts as a platform from which dominant groups can achieve status from their peers and the teacher, and where they can continue to dominate activities and decisions. The maintenance of this domination is enhanced and reproduced by imposing punitive sanctions on those that transgress from the ‘acceptable’ forms of masculinity and femininity, the Donald’s and the Penny’s.

An example of this is a student such as Robert. He is characterised by teachers and other students, as a poor achiever in physical education. Terms associated with students like Robert include; nerdy, lazy, not very athletic, and having poor motor skill ability. He is often perceived by teachers to not want to be involved. As Robert himself said...

I admit I am not the most physically able person in the class. That doesn’t mean that I don’t like physical education, because we sometimes do some really fun stuff. The biggest problem I have is that the others in the class don’t involve me in any activities or games, they spend time putting me down and calling me names, like wimp. They just won’t pass to me even if I’m on their team and have no one marking me. The teacher doesn’t make it any better. My teacher mixes up teams and tries to spread the ‘sporty’ people around amongst those of us that aren’t so good, but this doesn’t mean that I ever get a fair go at being involved, I’m still left out. The others still dominate every activity we do. I know they think I am a nerd and am just too lazy to get involved but I don’t think they realise how much affect their attitude towards me has on my involvement. How am I supposed to get better at anything when they don’t let me have an equal chance to learn or be involved. So they will keep thinking I am hopeless and hate
physical education, but they (being teachers and students) should have to take
some responsibility for why I might feel or act this way.

The group of students that Robert belongs to includes both males and females, all of whom
faced similar punitive sanctions, in a very overt manner from both teachers and fellow
students. However the boys in this group were perceived as wimps and less manly, while
the girls in this group were just there and were seen to not involve themselves. At no time
was the femininity of the girls within this group challenged or questioned. It would appear
that while they were non participants in physical education, they still exhibited an acceptable
form of femininity, so sanctions that they faced were based on physical ability and
involvement as opposed to any idea that they were not feminine.

Katie on the other hand faces the illusion of being a valued class member, but still feels that
she is excluded in many ways. Katie would be described by students and teachers as a very
able female athlete, a direct opposite to the female equivalent of Robert. She plays a range
of sport to a very high level and in many ways is as able, if not more so than most of the
males and females in the class. She is described by most teachers and students as
someone who enjoys physical education, has heaps of energy, is competitive, likes to win, is
generally more aggressive than the other girls in the class, and is confident, fast, and strong.
A range of students interviewed suggested that students like Katie were ‘tough hard woman’
and a ‘little butch.’

As she states ...

I love physical education it is my absolute favourite subject. I don’t hang around
in the changing rooms waiting for the other girls before I come out. I want to get
involved in class. Although I am always enthusiastic and into doing physical
education, sometimes I feel that I am sort of left out. I don’t fit in with the ‘sporty
boys’ unless we are playing a game and then they want me on their team
because I help them win. This is frustrating, as they should not be the ones who
determine my level of involvement. The majority of the other girls treat me like I
think I am better than them, and because I’m more interested in playing and
participating than socialising and being ‘cool’, then they sometimes are really
horrible, and call me ‘butch’ and stuff like that. There are days when I think it
would be easier to just be hopeless, or at least pretend to be, that way I might fit
in better. At least there is one other girl like me, so unless she is away I usually
have someone to work with, and lots of the time I don’t care what the other think
anyway.

So while she demonstrates many traditionally ‘masculine’ characteristics, such as being
physically able, Katie still has to deal with punitive sanctions for transgressing from the
dominant form of femininity demonstrated by the likes of Penny. One teacher in the study
suggested that there are “put downs if someone [a male] perhaps shows any overt femininity
or a girl who shows any overt masculinity, but that is pretty rare because kids know this
[transgressing acceptable forms of masculinity/femininity] is sort of outside the parameters of
normal social behaviour.” So for students like Robert and Katie this teacher contributes to
the stigmatism that they face by perceiving their behaviour as abnormal.

The evidence presented represents the collaborative ideas of four teachers and twenty
students. The findings provide evidence of how they view themselves and their role, within co-
educational physical education, in the New Zealand context. The evidence recognises
physical education as a site where hierarchies exist that support and reinforce socially
desirable forms of masculinity and femininity.
Discussion

While social hierarchies are not officially identified they exist in all environments in which people are organised according to certain characteristics. Therefore hierarchies are a dominant characteristic of any hidden curriculum. Within the physical education culture, where there is a “top” group that maintains power and privilege, and where all other groups become subordinate, without power or privilege, hierarchies exist as part of the social structures and perpetuate this power imbalance (Gillespie & Culpan, 2000; Sparkes, 1996). In the narratives outlined above students such as Donald make up the ‘top’ group, while all other ‘groups’ including those represented by Katie, Penny and Robert are subordinate.

Although there may be some room for non-conformity the division of masculine and feminine appears rigid, therefore, men and women who transgress hegemonic masculinities and femininities, by exhibiting behaviour associated with the other gender, are subject to ridicule and suspicion and face punitive sanctions for going against the grain (Griffin, 1989, p. 224; Marsh, 1996, p. 273). Marsh (1996) outlines that “cultural rules and expectations surrounding gender and sexual identity often become visible only when they are transgressed, when people break the rules” (p. 271). This is evident in the representations provided by both Katie and Robert. The recurring hierarchical groups that make up a physical education class demonstrate the marginalisation of individuals who are perceived to be “less able”, or in the case of some females, “too able”.

Students, who are perceived not to ‘fit’, are excluded in a variety of ways, including access to activities of their choice and their use in team based games. For example, for male students who were “nerdy”, or “less able”, punitive sanctions take the form of “being left out”, or “ignored”. This group appears to be the most marginalised within physical education classes and represent the group that possess the least power and privilege. Female students who are physically able and keen, they are often marginalised until their skills were required. While the punitive sanctions transgressors face may include verbal and physical bullying, it appears that exclusion, isolation, or limitations to involvement are more common sanctions for the less able males, and for the very able females, in the physical education context studied.

Teachers attempt to rectify the situation by “mixing” groups. They spread their “people with knowledge... and good leaders”. Students also are aware that teachers do not “put all the sporty people in one group, (but) put them in all different ones”. While “just numbering off” and “mixing the good people” is viewed as a fair way to mix up the groups, students believed that the dominant still maintain control however the division takes place. As Bain (1990) outlines, “participation in co-educational instruction does not change the overall pattern of male domination” (p. 34).

Among the students and teachers interviewed there are two distinct views on why the differential treatment of students occurred. Some students, mainly the likes of Donald and Katie, who are more physically able, think that the less able students leave themselves out, and should have to take responsibility for not getting involved. Even stating that, “they are not getting accepted because they don’t... they don’t talk to you or anything else so it makes it hard to try and communicate with them”. This aligns to Griffin (in Bain, 1990) who found that teachers believed that the “wimps” (p. 35), who brought about their own marginalisation and ridicule.

Other students suggest that the dominant group are responsible for the less able not getting involved. Students describe how the dominant, “top” or “sporty” group do not “basically
involve them (the less able) in the games that are played”. Students like Robert, tell of how “the good players always get the ball or whatever and the other players sort of get left out”.

In an activity where the physically dominant wish only to prove their domination by winning, the result is to basically leave the less able out. The idea of spreading the less able around so that they will get more opportunity is naive. The hierarchies still exist and those that are physically less able are marginalised to the same extent. Teams still comprised of sufficient numbers of competent players to enable a competitive game, without the need to use the less able, so their involvement is still minimal. This reflects a capitalist view of the society, where the ‘weak’ fall by the wayside in order for the ‘strong’ to maintain power. In a society where “the value of competition is so deeply embedded in Western capitalist discourses of sport and physical activity” (Wright, 1996, p. 77), it is difficult to breakdown hierarchies, as competition between groups is consistently used to establish and maintain masculine dominance. The mixing of ability groups for activities appears to simply reinforce the power structures and the privileged position of the dominant group which is generated by teachers and students within the class.

While we may have an illusion that the education system is meritocratic, in reality it appears to be quite different, with different positions filled by individuals in the class. A meritocratic education system is based on the notion that all students are educated on a ‘level playing field,’ where hard work and diligent application to study and participation determine student success. Meritocracy, however, serves to justify the application of double standards (Giroux, 1988a in Fernandez-Balboa, 1993) and discriminatory treatment. The most common result of this system is the exclusion and failure of those who are considered less ... physically “gifted” (Bain, 1990; Fernandez-Balboa, 1993, p. 235).

While we perceive physical education as meritocratic, hierarchies that exist amongst students in physical education, which are reinforced by teachers’ attitudes and behaviours, continue to allow for the replication and legitimisation of gendered ideologies. School policies and national curriculum statements suggest that everyone should be treated equally, however there appears to be little acceptance of the diverse forms of masculinities and femininities that are exhibited by students in the physical education settings studied.

Hierarchies that exist in physical education, based on physical ability, go unchallenged by both teachers and students, as they accept the hegemonic form of masculinity as the “top”. Ideologies and expectations reflected in teacher practices do not account for or foster an acceptance of a diverse range of masculinities and femininities. The status given to physical ability continues to support and reinforce a form of hegemonic masculinity that marginalises all other groups within the class. Where the hegemonic form of masculinity is based primarily on physical ability, the physical education class acts as a platform from which the dominant males, such as Donald, can achieve status and power and domination over all other males and females in physical education classrooms.

In this study it would appear that where teachers and students value hegemonic masculinity, in settings such as on the sports field or during physical activities in the classroom, those that do not achieve the characteristic or behaviours associated with the dominant form of masculinity or femininity are excluded or dominated by those that do. The dominated do not have the opportunities to achieve the success that a meritocratic education system should allow them.
Conclusion

The hierarchies that are evident in the four Canterbury co-educational secondary school physical education programmes studied appear to be based on physical ability and gender. This study demonstrates that the existence of these hierarchies within the structures of physical education classes, consistently lead to the domination of one group over others and the unjustified differential treatment of students (Fernandez-Balboa, 1993).

While there has been a perceived move to provide gender equality in our physical education classes, we have only every sort to provide girls with equal opportunities. Where hegemonic masculinity is so valued and ingrained in the practices and hierarchical structures of physical education and where students and teachers do not challenge it, there is little real change in the gender ideologies that exist, and little move toward more equitable programmes. This research suggests that there is no evidence that we are providing physical education experiences that demonstrate or contribute to an acceptance of a diverse range of masculinities and femininities; instead it appears as if we are simply providing a stage in which hegemonic masculinity can flourish. This impacts on the development of both males and females in the physical education environment.

With a more critically developed understanding of gender, and changes to their practices, physical educators could provide an environment where students do not experience domination and oppression, and instead are more accepting of diversity. This needs to happen in order to ensure that all students, whether they are male or female, regardless of what feminine or masculinity characteristics they exhibit, or where individuals position themselves on a masculinity to femininity continuum, have positive and meaningful experiences in physical education.

How we develop understanding, challenge hierarchical structures and change teaching practices and classroom environments is Maddeningly difficult. In depth studies, incorporating participant observation techniques possibly action research, of the hidden curriculum and gendered practices and programmes in the New Zealand setting need to be completed. Supplementary research would allow for the development of a well-grounded body of knowledge, generated in the classroom environment, to assist in the raising of consciousness of gender as an issue that is still prevalent in New Zealand physical education, and help develop practices that challenge the existing order of gendered physical education.
Bibliography


